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# GUN RICH

GILES A. LUTZ



First Book Publication



## MANHUNT IN VIRGINIA CITY

"Set an outlaw to catch an outlaw," was the principle on which Dan Eakin based his manhunt. To make it real, he took the part of a wanted gunman himself, with only one friend in the know, the man who was to pretend to be a lawman on his trail.

But the game was too dangerous to stay under control—particularly with his quarry, the real killer, tangling the play. If Dan didn't watch out, there'd be a real noose waiting for his neck and a real lawman siding his enemy.

It's a top-notch new Western novel by Giles A. Lutz, this year's Western Writers of America "Spur" winner.

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GILES A. LUTZ was born in Missouri, raised in Missouri, and lives on his own cattle ranch in Missouri. He says of himself: "Have always been interested in things Western. It's big country and things are done on a wide scope. Perhaps that interest led me into cattle raising, though the locale is far different and certainly the raising of breeding stock is a far different cry from cattle raising of the old West. But I like horses and cattle . . .

"Do my writing from six to nine in the mornings, then again in the evening. In between, attend to the needs of the stock (they're Registered Black Angus), and they seem to be the neediest critters alive."

Giles Lutz has been selling Westerns in short stories and novels for a good many years.

# ***GUN RICH***

by

**GILES A. LUTZ**

**ACE BOOKS, INC.**

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GUN RICH

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*Ace Books by Giles Lutz include:*

LAW OF THE TRIGGER (D-408)

THE CHALLENGER (D-436)

THE WILD QUARRY (D-492)

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BATTLING BUCKEROOS

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## CHAPTER ONE

THE NIGHT was an immense black bowl, blotting out the bulk and sharp edges of the surrounding mountains. This was mountainous country, and if it wasn't for the roads and the lights of the city ahead, a man would feel lost. The thin air of the mountains was cold at this time of night, and the rider shivered and drew his mackinaw together. A long trip was behind him, and he wished he were headed back. He was used to the flat plains of Texas, where there was nothing to break the sweep of the eye, where the air in September did not bite into a man's bones.

He sat slump-shouldered, his eyes brooding as he rolled a cigarette. In the thin, clear air, the city lights looked much closer than they were. He still had another two hour ride ahead of him. The horse bobbed its head with impatience and breathed a soft, blubbery sigh.

"I don't blame you, Stepper," Dan Eakin said and patted the animal's neck. "I'm kind of tired and hollow, myself."

No city lights had an appeal for him. Now if those were his own lights, beckoning to him from the modest ranch house after a hard day's work, that would be different. He swore at himself for the sudden rush of yearning. Nobody had asked him to come here. It was his own idea. But the tone of Ferris Gaede's letter had been despondent after six months of fruitless search. It took great failure to put that

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despondency into Gaede's words, for he was an optimistic man. He hadn't asked for help, but the plea underlined each written word, and Dan Eakin owed Ferris a lot. What he could do, he didn't know, but he had to try.

He snapped the half-finished cigarette away and watched the fiery arc of its fall. It lit with a splatter of sparks, and its eye glowed sullenly for a moment before it winked out.

Eakin sighed and said, "Stepper, we'd better be moving on."

He kept the horse at a slow pace, fearing an unknown road in the dark. The road was wide and showed evidence of heavy traffic. It was also rough and pitted with holes. Rocks kept slipping down from the mountainside to litter it. Gaede had written that Virginia City had grown to fifteen thousand people. It sounded like all the people in the world to Dan Eakin. One of them was a murderer. He was faceless and nameless, and he left no more trace than a man walking across rock. Eakin's irritation came back. If Ferris Gaede hadn't been able to do anything, what made Eakin think he could? But he had to try. He wanted Gaede back home, and Gaede would not come until he found his son's murderer.

He passed a train of six prairie schooners, the canvas of the wagons looming ghostly in the night. He replied to the remarks shouted at him, noting the cheerfulness in them. These people were near their goal, and tomorrow held nothing for them but wealth. This road was crowded with the ghosts of such hopes, for wagon trains had passed him, heading back to somewhere, the faces of the people heavy with defeat. It was always that way with a boomtown. Thousands rushed to it, but only a disproportionate few found the wealth they were seeking. Eakin thought soberly about it. Maybe a man wasn't supposed to make a fortune in a few weeks; maybe he was supposed to build slowly and carefully . . . He let the thought slip away.

He knew what he would find in Virginia City. A new, wealthy city always drew that class of people. The honest, hard-striving men would be surrounded by the wolves, their eyes sharp as they waited for the first sign of wealth to



appear so that they could strip it away. Wolves, both male and female, he thought. The gamblers, with their agile, crooked fingers, the harpies with their painted smiles—those people were subtle in their stripping. The toughs would be here, too, men who used a gun, or a knife, or just plain muscle. He was looking for one murderer. He could probably take his pick out of several dozen with the number growing daily.

Even after dark, the road teemed with traffic, moving in both directions. He could not always see it, but the noise of its moving was ahead and behind him. He passed an immense freight train, its huge wagons pounding more holes into the road, lifting and filling the air with dust. Its teamsters were a profane lot, shouting curses at him as he passed, probably in envy at his superior speed.

Twice, before he reached the city, he pulled off the road to let a stage coach thunder by. The heavy rumbling of the wheels, the pistol-sharp reports of the driver's whip announced the vehicle's coming in advance. Four teams snaked the carriages along, and going down grade they made tremendous speed. Eakin watched the rocking, swaying vehicles until the night swallowed them. As tiresome as his journey had been, he would still take his saddle in preference to the very dubious comforts of a trip in one of those stages.

At the outskirts of the city, the traffic became worse. Great drays, loaded with ore, choked the streets. Road-breaking wagons, loaded with logs for the steam engines and timbers for the mines, slowed traffic to a crawl. Eakin had never before seen hauling on such a scale. Those great log wagons were drawn by twenty mule teams and trailed another three or four wagons. They could carry as much as twenty cords of wood at a load and were almost as long as a city block. It took skill to maneuver those huge loads through city streets. Skill and profanity and the popping of those long whips. The drivers stood, roaring their curses at their teams, at the choking traffic, and the popping of their whips sounded like gunfire.

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They jammed their teams into the slightest hole that showed, indifferent to the safety of life or limb of others. Pedestrians skipped across the street under the noses of those oncoming teams, and a dozen times, Eakin held his breath, certain that the daring crosser was going to be pounded to pulp under those hoofs. His forehead was moist as he watched a man dart across the street. The man never looked back after his perilous trip. It must be a hazard of city living, and men accepted and grew indifferent to it.

The sidewalks were filled with hurrying men, the tide of foot traffic now flowing smoothly along, now jamming together in a struggling, pushing knot as some bottleneck choked passage. Drivers swore and raved in the streets as their rigs were blocked. Dust and heat and the smell of man and animal offended the nose. The ear was pounded by the swearing, the cracking of thirty-foot blacksnakes, the grind of steel-rimmed wheels on rock. The braying of mules and a sudden burst of garish laughter, as Eakin passed a saloon, blended into a discordant melody. He felt suddenly wild-eyed and hemmed in. There was nothing attractive or inviting to him in this dirty, noisy city.

He saw a livery stable a half block down the street and headed for it. In these choked streets, a man would make better time on foot.

He handed the reins to the hostler and asked, "Is it always like this?"

The hostler was old, and he used the prerogative of age. He stared openly at Eakin before he answered. He saw a man standing well over six feet and proportionately broad in the shoulders and chest. The tall, hard frame carried no surplus flesh. The hands were big and hardened, knowing all of the tasks of running a ranch. The face was grave, almost somber in repose, but the mouth was big and mobile, and laughter could move it. The eyes were gray and set deep, with an instinctive, wary look. Not the look of the hunted, but the careful look of a man, who knew the odds of life and intended to keep on knowing.

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The length of the old man's scrutiny was a minor irritant, and Eakin asked, "Do I satisfy you?"

The old man sighed. "I was just thinking. Thirty years ago, I looked just like you."

Eakin chuckled. The old man never saw the day he could reach five-foot ten, even standing on his toes. His shoulders were narrow, his chest pinched.

The old man flared at Eakin's show of mirth. "By God, I did. I haven't shoveled manure all my life."

Eakin's face sobered. "Sorry, old-timer. I wasn't laughing at you. I was just wondering how long it took to get a question answered."

The old man grinned, showing broken, yellowed teeth. "I was coming to it. That's the trouble with the world today. Everybody rushing from no place to nowhere." He turned his head and watched the traffic crawl past. "It never stops. It goes on twenty-four hours a day, and it's getting worse. Everybody rushing here to get wealthy. Men come in Saturday night broke and by Monday morning, they're millionaires. Mister, a man can't afford to stand still here. He's got to hurry, or someone will beat him to it."

The fabulous riches of the Comstock Lode had built the city and pulled all these people here. The old man was wrong about one thing. A few people might find those Monday morning riches. Most would leave broke.

Eakin said, "I thought you didn't approve of rushing."

The old man grinned again. "I'm different. I'm satisfied with a little. Let me give you a piece of advice. Don't trust your best friend here. This is a tough town. You do nothing but mind your own business, and you still can't stay out of trouble."

Eakin said, "I'll remember that." It was probably the soundest piece of advice he would receive. "Give him a rubdown and a feed of oats." He let his hand rest for a moment on Stepper's neck. "He's earned it."

The gleam in the old man's eyes said he appreciated good horseflesh. "You could sell him before you got a half block from here." He cackled at the outrage in Eakin's face. "Don't

close your mind to it. I've seen a lot of 'em sold, sold by men, who wouldn't part with their horses for anything." He held out a scrawny hand. It looked as if it were a stranger to water. "That'll be two dollars and a half."

Eakin breathed gustily at the price. He growled, "Not all the bandits here wear guns."

The old man grinned. "Oats come high. Everything has to be freighted in. You can take him some place else. Won't do you any good."

Eakin counted the money out into his hand.

The old man's hand closed claw-like over it. He said with macabre cheerfulness, "Hope you're alive to claim him tomorrow."

Eakin grinned faintly and moved out into the flow of jostling, hurrying humanity. Men hurried, when apparently they had no particular place to go. The attitude was contagious. It seized a man, and he had to check himself to keep the tide from engulfing and sweeping him along.

Eakin thought soberly, Pete Gaede would have liked this activity, this constant changing scene. Even as a kid, the quietness of the open spaces had built his restlessness instead of soothing it. Pete would have been twenty this month, four years younger than Eakin. He had come to Virginia City to find a fortune. Instead, he had taken a bullet. Ferris Gaede had died then, too. Oh, not outwardly. Outwardly, he looked the same—except to a man, who knew him best, a man who could see the light of living go out of his eyes.

Eakin thought, maybe I can help Ferris, maybe the savage satisfaction of finding the man he's after, will put the light back.

He kept close to the building side of the walk. A man was too easily knocked out into the street on the other edge of the walk. He thought, I should have asked the old man where I can find Ferris Gaede. He almost turned back, then shook his head. He needed a meal and a drink; he could make his inquiries at a restaurant, or a saloon.

A woman appeared in the doorway of a building and plucked at his sleeve. He looked at the bold, painted mouth,

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at the bolder invitation in the eyes. She said softly, "Aren't you lonely, honey?"

He would bet that a man would hear the same question fifty times a night in this town. He could have all the feminine companionship he wanted—for a price. The paint and the too bright invitation were only garish tinsel to hide a weariness that went deeper than bone. He could not tell her age, but he suspected the paint lowered it by many years. He felt a pity for her as he shook his head. He heard the soft curse she threw after him.

He passed a tent, where a bunch of men surrounded a mine representative recruiting labor for the Ophir mine. The man saw Eakin and liked his size. He pushed through the crowd and seized Eakin's arm. His voice was persuasive as he said, "We're paying four dollars a day, Jack. That's good wages. How about signing with us?"

Eakin said, "Let go of my arm." His tone carried a warning.

The man's face turned a dull red. He turned and plunged back toward the tent.

A dozen strides on, a barker bellowed for workers on the wood ranches near Lake Tahoe. A tailor in a log cabin had a sign in his unglassed window asking for help. Another man went frantically through the crowd, soliciting help to finish the stone hotel he was building. Bars and restaurants begged for cooks, waiters, and bartenders. A wagon works wanted anybody husky enough to tighten a wagon bolt. A candle-maker needed help to make the candles he supplied the mines for their tunnels and was raving because no one would listen to him. Apparently, people came to Virginia City in the hopes of picking up riches out of the street. But it seemed as if no one wanted to work for them.

At the corner of C and Stanton Streets, Eakin stopped before a large frame building housing a broker's office. A crowd of speculators jammed around a bulletin board, reading aloud the latest quotations on mine shares. Groans and cheers went up at each posted figure. Everyone with cash, or anything that could be turned into cash was speculating.

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Eakin saw Chinese and Mexicans and Americans. Foppishly dressed men rubbed shoulders with men in the roughest of clothing.

A man turned white at the quoted price on Last Chance. He said hoarsely, "Check that price again." He aged twenty years, when the price was confirmed. He turned and plunged through the crowd, his eyes unseeing.

Someone said, "Poor Charley. Last week, he was a millionaire. This breaks him."

His companion asked, "What will he do now?"

The first speaker said callously, "If it was me, I'd blow my brains out."

Eakin watched with interest. Men could apparently make or lose fortunes by the posting of a figure. He saw the entranced faces and shook his head. This was a disease of epidemic proportions, burning away all country, all moral values. It was something he could never understand. A man's wealth lay in a herd of cattle, a dozen sections of good grazing land. It lay in something he could feel, something he could hold onto and say, this is mine, earned with sweat and backache.

A man sidled up to him and said, "I can get you a thousand shares of Lost Dog. It'll make you a fortune in a week."

The man was thin, the thinness showing most in his lean, hungry face. His clothing was threadbare, and one boot was broken.

Eakin said, "You look like you need it more than I do," and pushed him out of the way. He supposed this desire for quick wealth could be as acute as a drunk's craving for whisky. It would never touch him. He would go the slow, the hard way. But what he got he earned, not because somebody changed a figure on a board.

He tried a half-dozen restaurants on the main street, and they were jammed. He moved on, turning into a quieter street. It was quieter only by contrast to the main street, but he could move without elbows constantly in his ribs. A tent restaurant was across the street, and the smell of frying

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steaks drifted to him. The aroma reawakened the gnaw in his belly and started saliva in his mouth.

As he started across the street, he heard a woman's frightened scream. Immediately upon its echoes was the heavy boom of a hand gun. The gun's echoes were drowned by a chorus of scared yelling. Eakin saw the tent bulge at the flaps as men fought for exit. Then the whole front wall of the canvas tent seemed to explode as men burst through it. They fled down the street, casting scared glances over their shoulders at the swaying tent. Their fear was infectious, and passersby broke into a run, scurrying for cover like frightened quail. Even the full-skirted women hoisted their skirts and ran. Eakin caught glimpses of more female leg in a few seconds, than he would in the next six months.

In the space of a wink, the street was empty. Eakin stood in the middle of the street, his eyes alert. Mybe he should be as wise as the fleeing passerbys, but he had always had an aversion to running—at least, until he knew what he was running from.

He heard another shot, and the tent swayed back and forth. It looked as if someone had grabbed the main pole and was shaking it. A guy rope parted with a small pop, and several tent pegs tore out of the ground. The tent picked up greater sway. It was a big tent, and it would take great strength to make it rock this way.

A woman ran out of the falling tent. In the wash of light from the next-door building her face showed a mixture of emotions—fear, anger and a terribly urgency. "Stop him," she cried. "He's wrecking my tent."

Eakin ran toward her, getting a confused impression of a slight figure, topped by luxuriant red hair.

Before he could speak, she seized his arm and cried, "He came in and started wrecking my business. If you don't stop him . . ."

She turned her head at the sharp, splintering crack. The tent settled slowly to the ground like a tired, dirty, white cloud. Several people were caught under the canvas, their

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positions marked by the heaving bulges of the tent as they struggled to free themselves.

The woman's slumping shoulders said it was too late to save her tent. She bit her lip and said, "Oh damn." Tears sparkled in her eyes, but her expression was more angry than afraid.

Confusion held Eakin. He had heard a shot and had seen fleeing people. He watched a tent flatten and looked at an angry woman, begging him for help. He wanted to help her, but what was he after? Where was his starting point?

He saw the tip of a knife blade protrude through the fallen roof of the tent, then the length of the blade appeared. The blade made a great, slashing rip, and the two edges of the canvas were thrown aside. A giant of a man pushed up through the slit. He cradled a small box under one arm and held a pistol in the other hand.

The woman had never let go of Eakin's arm. He looked into her face and saw that she was young, somewhere around twenty he would judge.

"There he is," she cried. "He tore down my tent. He's got my cash box. He's stealing my money."

The big man's bearded face turned toward Eakin. The eyes narrowed, and the mouth opened in a soundless snarl. The fact that Eakin wasn't running meant opposition to the big man. He whipped his body around, and the gun hand raised.

The woman was in the line of fire, but that wasn't stopping the big man. Eakin shoved her aside and drew with the smoothness Ferris Gaede had taught him. He shot before the other's gun was fully trained on him.

The big man staggered back, his arms flailing for balance. He dropped the cash box and grabbed the wrist of the shattered hand. Eakin heard his howl of pain and anger. He hadn't tried to wing him. Gaede's teaching was too ingrained in his mind. "When you got cause to shoot at a man, shoot to kill him." Eakin had that in mind, but to protect the woman, he had to draw and shoot too fast.

He yelled, "Stay there," and ran toward him.



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The big man whirled and ran toward the rear of the lot. He was hurt, Eakin saw the blood dripping from the maimed hand, but it wasn't affecting his legs.

The man was unarmed, and Eakin hated to shoot him again. He yelled, "Hold it," and fired over his head.

Neither warning, nor shot stopped the man. He raced over the fallen tent, skipping over the folds and leaping the struggling mounds. The woman cried out in warning. It could have been directed at Eakin, or at the fleeing man.

Eakin ran after him, hearing the woman cry out again, this time with more warning. He crossed the folds of the tent, and the big man was twenty yards ahead of him. The light wasn't too good back here. The man disappeared suddenly, and for an instant, Eakin thought he had fallen. He checked his stride abruptly. The man had fallen all right, but a great deal farther than the length of his height. The front of the tent restaurant was on street level, but such was the slope of the mountain, upon which Virginia City rested, that the rear of the lot was thirty feet above the next level. The big man had literally dropped off the edge.

Eakin peered over the edge and holstered his pistol. He had no need of it now. The big bulk lay across a crushed tent. Its pole protruded through the man's chest, sticking out a good two feet above his back. Eakin saw no motion in the figure below him. He thought harshly, it was quick. Too quick for him even to scream.

## CHAPTER TWO

THE WOMAN came to the edge of the lot and looked down before Eakin could stop her. He saw the shudder run through her and wished the light was even poorer.

"It's awful, isn't it?" she said faintly.

He thought the horror in her eyes was because of his actions, and he knew a corresponding anger. He hadn't pushed the man onto the tent pole.

She wailed, "I'd rather he'd taken the money than this."

Eakin's anger faded with his understanding. One could always get money back. He decided a lot of the horror in her eyes was directed at herself.

He said, "Don't be blaming yourself. A man who sets out with a gun in his hand usually earns what he gets."

She broke into sobs and suddenly, she was in his arms. He wasn't conscious of reaching for her, or her moving toward him, but he was patting her awkwardly on the shoulder. He was wise enough to take no personal inference from her move. She had gone through a shocking moment, and she needed solace. He was the only one to turn to.

The sobbing faded into sniffles, and she tried to smile. It didn't quite come off, but the effort was there. "I haven't even thanked you," she said. "All the money, I have, is in that cash box." She blushed and pulled away from him. "I'm not a weak female, Mr. . . ." She hesitated, and he said gravely, "Eakin, Ma'am. Dan Eakin."

"Mr. Eakin," she went on, "that breaks into tears at any pretext. What makes it so awful is that he was a regular customer of mine. He ate breakfast with me only this morning."

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Eakin's interest sharpened. "You knew him?"

She nodded. "His name was Jude Kallas. I can't understand why he did it. He had a regular job with Wells Fargo."

A regular job didn't mean anything. Not in a town with as many ways as this one had to take a man's money. "Was he drunk?" Eakin suggested.

She shook her head, but there was doubt in the gesture. "I don't think so. It didn't seem like he had robbery on his mind, when he started out. It looked like he wanted to wreck my tent more than anything else."

Eakin chuckled. "Have you been serving him bad meals?"

She gave him a wry smile. "He ordered everyone out, then started tearing down the tent. He picked up the cash box almost as an afterthought."

People were moving cautiously to the scene. The cash box lay on the flattened tent in plain sight. Eakin moved to it and picked it up. As the crowd grew it would be easy for someone to kick it into the shadows, then recover it later.

"You'd better hang onto this," he said.

"Look at my tent," she wailed. "It's ruined."

The damage looked worse than it actually was. It would take a new main pole, and the long rip would have to be repaired. A few tent pegs would have to be redriven and a guy line spliced.

He said, "You'll be back in business before noon tomorrow." He said hopefully, "I'll be glad to come back in the morning and help."

He saw the sweet rush of color into her face. Somehow, the memory of how she felt in his arms brought down all the loneliness in the world upon him. She was a little thing, standing barely five feet. In the moon's wash, her hair looked black, but artificial light had shone him it was red. Not a fiery, harsh red, but a soft tone like the color of a newly minted penny. He couldn't tell the color of her eyes, but he would bet they were green. Green eyes always seemed to go with that color of hair. He liked the way those eyes were set above the high cheek bones. Her cheeks were hollowed as if she worked too hard, or didn't get quite

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enough to eat. He grinned inwardly as he thought, she wouldn't appreciate that. She had a tough, determined chin, fashioned from the inner strength of her. She might break into momentary female weakness, but it wouldn't last long. This girl asked nothing of life. She clawed her way. It was in the proud lift of her head, in the straight line of her shoulders. She was sweetly made, and the memory of the feel of her would stay with him for a long time.

Before she could speak, an angry voice said, "What's going on here, Unity?"

Eakin repeated the name to himself. He liked it. He turned to look at the questioner.

The man was tall and well-proportioned, but he had a soft look about him, the soft look of the city man. His face was plump and shadows of coming fat were beginning to gather around his chin. He had a beak of a nose, flaring at the nostrils. Eakin thought his eyes were black, or a brown so deep it looked black. The skin around the edges of the man's eyes was smooth. Cold eyes, Eakin thought. Not given much to smiling. He had the fleeting impression, a dangerous man, and wondered where it came from. The man's soft hands and face, the dude clothing he wore, were certainly no basis of it.

The man said petulantly, "I asked you what was going on, Unity."

People crowded past them, making their way to the back edge of the lot to look at the impaled man. Their comments drifted back to Eakin. He stood quietly, watching the newcomer.

Unity had a low boiling point. Either the question or something in its tone set her off. "You tell me what's going on, Horace Gibney. Jude Kallas worked for you. And he comes here to ruin me."

Gibney recoiled in horror at her implication. "Unity, you don't think . . ." He had trouble forming that question, and he tried another. "Because a man works for me, am I responsible for what he does, when he's off duty." His anger returned. "None of this had to happen. But you insist upon

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running this place. When you deal with rough people, something like this can happen again and again."

Some old conflict was between them. Eakin could tell by the way her anger mounted to meet Gibney's. She flared, "I'm not asking anything from you. Not even your advice."

His anger retreated before hers. "Unity, I didn't mean it the way you take it. You know I'm concerned about you. I'll speak to Kallas about this. I'll make him pay for the damage."

"That's going to be hard to do," Eakin said drily. "He's dead."

Gibney flashed him a startled glance. "You killed him?"  
"He killed himself. He fell off the back of the lot, trying to get away."

Gibney looked at Unity. "Don't you see what can happen to you." He seized her wrist. "I won't have you in this position."

Unity tugged to free her wrist. She said acidly, "You haven't anything to say about it." She tugged again and cried, "Let go of me."

Eakin said softly, "I'd do as the lady asks you."

Gibney let go of her. His eyes were wild as he looked at Eakin, and for a moment, Eakin had the feeling he was going to swing on him. He saw a flash of naked, raw violence in the man and thought, the softness is only surface.

It took effort for Gibney to control himself. He dropped her wrist and straightened his coat. He looked around at the curious, watching people, then back at Eakin. The look was a cataloging one, marking Eakin for future reference.

He said to Unity, "I'll talk to you about this, later," and pushed through the crowd.

Eakin watched him stride away, then glanced at Unity. He had a dozen questions he wanted to ask, but all of them would be prying into her business. Her mouth was closed tightly. She wasn't going to talk about it.

He said, "I guess I'd better report this."

She looked past him and said, "You won't have to go far. The marshal's coming now."

Eakin turned his head to watch the man part the crowd.

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The man walked with a dragging limp, the result of an old bullet wound in the hip. His face was seamed, and a new looseness was in the skin. Eakin didn't have to look for Ferris Gaede. Gaede was here. Eakin kept the recognition off his face. Ferris looked bad. He had noticeably aged, and his shoulders had a new sag. Little signs of suffering were written in his face. A man, who knew him well, could read those signs. Eakin had a sudden insight. If he was going to help Gaede, maybe he shouldn't be too closely identified with him.

Gaede said, "Somebody said a man was killed here."

He looked at Eakin, and recognition changed and tightened his face. It put life into his eyes and lifted his shoulders.

Eakin gave him a barely perceptible shake of his head, and Gaede caught its significance. The recognition left his face, and he said gruffly, "What about this man being killed?"

Eakin looked at the dull gleam of the badge on Gaede's coat. Gaede was an efficient lawman. He had cleaned up Odessa, and Eakin wasn't surprised to find him in the same business here. The town picked a good man, he thought.

"He killed himself," he said. "I shot him in the hand, and he ran off the back of the lot."

"Who was he?"

Unity answered, "Jude Kallas." She didn't like Gaede's attitude, and she said, "Mr. Eakin prevented Jude from stealing my money. Look what he did to my tent."

"He'll have to go with me," Gaede said stubbornly. "A man's been killed. I'll have to hold him until I make an investigation."

Unity's face was indignant. "That's not fair. He didn't do . . ."

Eakin interrupted her. "Maybe I don't want to go with him."

He crouched, and the crowd scattered, seeing trouble.

Gaede said quietly, "I can take you that way, too, if you want it like that."

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"Please," Unity said frantically to Eakin. "go with him. He can't do anything to you."

Eakin straightened slowly. To the watching people, Gaede had backed him down. He grinned inwardly. It didn't hurt to enhance Gaede's standing in the eyes of the townspeople.

"All right," he growled. "I'll go with him. But it's a hell of a way to treat strangers."

He moved down the street with Gaede. He looked back after a half dozen strides. Unity was watching them.

## CHAPTER THREE

THE SHADES were drawn in Gaede's office and the front door was locked. Eakin rested on the end of his tail-bone and the back of his neck. His long legs were sprawled out before him. He had two shots of Ferris' good whisky in his belly, and he felt relaxed and lazy.

"This is real comfort, Ferris. Do all criminals get this kind of treatment?"

"Are you going to talk to me?" Gaede growled. "Or do I bend a gun barrel over your head?"

Eakin threw up his arms in mock alarm. He grinned and said, "Maybe you could still do it, Ferris."

He had a tremendous affection for this man. He couldn't have loved his father any more. Differently perhaps, but not any more. His mind jumped back over the years, recalling all this man had done for him. He remembered the death of his mother. She had died of lung fever, when he was ten. He had known racking grief, but still it had been a child's grief. His father was killed, when Eakin was fifteen, killed when a half-broken team spilled a buggy. He remembered the intensity of that grief, the terrible feeling of loneliness. Those twenty sections of land seemed all of the world, and he was supposed to run the ranch. He was supposed to make the decisions, and the enormity of the burden was overwhelming.

Ferris and Pete Gaede were his neighbors, and Eakin let Ferris take over the arrangements for the funeral, because he was too dazed to think clearly. Pete was four years younger than Eakin, and he and his father had always been friends of the Eakins. But that day, they seemed like strangers.



## GUN RICH

Three days later, when Ferris rode over, Eakin rebelled openly. "I don't need your help," he shouted. "I can run this ranch." He had to squinch hard to keep back the tears. But his father would have wanted him standing on his own feet.

"Sure you can," Ferris Gaede said gently. "But I came over to ask your help. You know Jim Eakin and me was always pretty close. He helped me out of many a tight pinch. I guess I have to depend on you now."

He was a wise man. He left a youngster his pride, his feeling that he was capable. Eakin was eighteen before he really discovered that Ferris Gaede led and directed him constantly. Gaede had taken up, where Eakin's father left off, and he had done a thorough job. He taught Eakin how to use a gun, and Eakin never forgot his growled advice, "Use it only when you have to. If it ever makes you feel like a big man, I'll take it away from you."

They merged the two ranches, when Eakin was twenty. The people of Odessa wanted Gaede as their marshal, and it had taken him the better part of two years to clean out a tough situation. How well Eakin remembered the night Ferris came to him, and this time he was really asking for advice.

"It's not your job," Eakin had protested.

"I don't live in town, if that's what you mean," Gaede said. "But I trade there. And I figure what affects the town will reach out some day and affect me."

It didn't kill the protest in Eakin. "Let them pick one of their own." He remembered Gaede's faint smile before he answered, "Maybe their own have lived with it too long. Maybe they need someone too dumb to realize what he's stepping into."

Eakin gave up then. Ferris Gaede was a mule-stubborn man, when it came to a sense of duty.

Gaede had finished a pipe before he spoke again. Eakin could still recall the sucking sound of it. Gaede's pipes were always in need of cleaning.

Gaede said, "I was wondering what you'd think of putting the two ranches together. I'll be gone most of the time, and you know Pete. He's kind of rattle-brained. I figure if you'd

run both of them, mine wouldn't be going downhill, while I'm away."

It must have been a difficult thing for a father to say about his son. Gaede put it more harshly than it really was. Pete was irresponsible. He loved excitement, and the monotonous routine of ranch work galled an active spirit. Blondehaired, blue-eyed Pete. It still hurt when Eakin thought of him. Pete, with the constant laughter on his lips. Pete, who always looked for a lark before he looked for work.

Gaede spoke and jerked Eakin's thoughts out of the past. "You're a hell of a long way from home. Who'd you leave in charge of the ranch?"

"Red Pendleton."

Gaede nodded. "A good man."

"Better than I am," Eakin said lazily. "What are you doing wearing a badge?"

Gaede looked at the badge on his coat. "They heard about what I did in Odessa. They thought I might do the same thing here. I thought I could find Pete's murderer better in an official capacity. This is a rotten town, Dan," he said passionately. "Too much money floating around. And too many people who'd rather steal it than work for it. I clean out a couple of rat's nests, and two dozen more are building, while I'm doing it."

He glared at Eakin. "I don't recollect asking you for any help. I'd be easier-minded, if I knew things back home were being taken care of."

Eakin said gently, "I wanted you back, Ferris. That's why I came up here. I thought two of us might finish it that much quicker."

Gaede shook his head, a heavy, defeated gesture. "I haven't found a thing, Dan. I don't know any more than the day I got here."

He thumbed tobacco into his pipe and stared at something Eakin couldn't see.

Eakin waited until the pipe was going. "Tell me about it," he said.

## GUN RICH

Gaede lifted his head. "You know the hell I raised, when Pete said he was coming here."

Eakin nodded. That was a stormy night.

"I think that was the only time I really wanted to knock some sense into his head. But he had to see Virginia City."

"He was young," Eakin said. He remembered the reports that filtered in about Virginia City. It was enough to excite anybody.

"You were young, too," Gaede said harshly. "You didn't leave." His face twisted, and his eyes looked past Eakin. He was looking at a failure, a failure in handling Pete.

Eakin wanted to say, you couldn't have changed anything, Ferris. Nobody could have changed it.

Gaede asked, "You remember that letter we got from him?"

Eakin nodded. The first and only one. Pete's buoyant spirits showed between the lines. He had taken a job driving for Wells Fargo. He was making big money and having the time of his life. There was another letter from Virginia City, a short, official one, saying simply that Pete had been killed. There was nothing Ferris Gaede could do, but he had insisted upon going. Eakin remembered the shock, when Gaede wrote back that Pete had been murdered.

He waited until Gaede felt like talking again.

"It was a holdup," Gaede said. "I talked to some of the passengers on the stage. Pete was standing with his hands up. But one of the bandits shot. The passengers remembered what that bandit said. He turned to one of his men and said, maybe that'll teach the other drivers not to cause us any trouble in the future."

"Nobody knew the bandits?"

Gaede shook his head. "They were masked. I haven't picked up a trace." The tired lines in his face, the heavy droop to his shoulders told how Ferris Gaede had driven himself. Eakin could understand the obsession of wanting Pete's murderer. But there was more than that to it. It would be a sort of atonement, a wiping out of the mistake of letting Pete come here. Combined, it made a driving, relentless force.

## GUN RICH

Gaede said, "They made a nice haul. Pete was carrying twenty bars of bullion. It was mostly silver, but it had enough gold in it to be worth two thousand dollars a bar."

Eakin whistled softly. "How much does one of those bars weigh?"

"Around a hundred pounds."

Eakin frowned. "How did they handle that much weight?"

"Wagons or pack animals. I know what you're thinking. Wagons or pack animals would have to move slow. But nobody saw a wagon or pack train. The name of the mining company was cast into each bar, and that brand can't be changed. None of those bars showed up."

"They took them someplace else, Ferris. Hell, they could be a thousand miles away by now."

Gaede shook his head. "The road agents still operate. We're averaging a holdup a month. Wells Fargo hires guards, but they're no good. They quit at the first sight of masked men. They're taking the warning of Pete's death pretty seriously. I've ridden a few times, and nothing's happened. Nobody cares too much. It tickles most people that Wells Fargo is getting hit."

"Why?"

"Go down to the depot tomorrow and watch how they handle passengers. Their rates are sky-high, and that doesn't get them any sympathy. Most people can't feel very sorry about a mine owner losing a little of his bullion. They think all he has to do is to grind up a few more tons of rock and make up his losses. I've even heard men say the road agents are a good thing for the community. They keep the money in local circulation instead of letting it get out of the country. It's a smooth organization, Dan. And I haven't got the slightest line on it."

Eakin rubbed his thumb along his jaw line. "None of those bars have shown up?"

Gaede said fretfully, "Not a one. I told you they were smooth."

"They're doing something with them," Eakin said. It wasn't a brilliant observation, and he knew it. Maybe they were

stockpiling those bars. But that would be risky. They would bulk up, and even the safest of hiding places could be discovered.

"How about the horses they ride?" Eakin asked. "Hasn't anybody recognized the horses?"

Gaede said wearily, "I've checked that out. It looks as though none of them ever ride the same horse twice."

Eakin gave the road agents grudging credit. People could describe a man's horse before they could describe him. They could tell you, 'Bill Smith rode a strawberry roan, or Verl Travis has a new claybank,' when they couldn't tell you what either man looked like. He doubted that talking to Wells Fargo would do any good. Ferris would have obtained the last possible scrap of information Wells Fargo had.

Eakin reflected on the information Gaede had given him. He had a sum total of nothing. No wonder frustration had dug new lines in Gaede's face.

He said, "Maybe I could get a job driving for Wells Fargo."

Gaede said violently, "No. Do you want to commit suicide? You resist this bunch, and they'll pick you off so damned fast you wouldn't know what happened."

Eakin grinned. "I wasn't planning on resisting the holdup. But I might be able to learn how they operate. We've got to have a starting point, Ferris."

Gaede said stubbornly, "It's not your fight."

Eakin stood. "The hell it isn't. I want you back home. I'm getting tired of doing all the work." He saw the flash of gratitude in Gaede's eyes. "Who do I see at Wells Fargo?"

Gaede sighed and said, "Gibney. He's the manager."

"Horace Gibney?"

"You've met him?"

"I've seen him." Eakin tried hard to make his next words casual. "He and Unity were having some kind of fuss. What's her last name, Ferris?"

Gaede grinned bleakly. "So she got to you, too."

Eakin said hotly, "She was in trouble. I was only trying to help her." He saw that he had swallowed the bait, and he

growled, "Go to hell." He grinned and said, "All right. She took my eye. What's between Unity and Gibney."

"Gibney's been trying to get her to marry him."

She wouldn't have any part of it, Eakin thought violently. She couldn't consider marrying that soft, city fop.

"She's smarter than that," he said.

"Maybe," Gaede answered. "But a woman can get lonely."

"Is she here by herself?"

Gaede nodded. "Her father was killed, working his claim. The claim was worthless. She didn't fold. She built a business, and she was doing all right until tonight." He said thoughtfully, "I've got to talk to Gibney about Jude Kallas."

"I kind of figured on looking into that," Eakin said. So she had made her way on her own. Seeing that tough, little chin could have told him that. He started for the door. "I'll keep in touch with you."

Regret was in Gaede's voice. "I wish you could stay with me. But maybe you're right. Maybe you can go faster, if no connection shows between us. I can recommend the Mecca. It's clean and as cheap as any hotel in town." Gruffness roughened his voice. "Thanks, Dan."

"For what?" Eakin said jeeringly. "You might make it look like you're throwing me out of your office."

He stepped out onto the walk, and Gaede stood in the doorway. Gaede shouted, "You watch your step. I'm keeping an eye on you. We've got too many people like you here, already."

It checked the flow of foot traffic. People, near Eakin, stopped and looked curiously from him to Gaede.

"You go to hell," Eakin shouted back. He pushed aside the people in front of him and moved on down the walk. It occurred to him that Gaede never did tell him Unity's last name. He said a soft oath. He couldn't go back and ask now.

## CHAPTER FOUR

THE MECCA was everything Ferris Gaede said it was. But Eakin didn't sleep well. The rumbling of passing wheels and the cracking of whips kept him awake for a long time. Then, too, his mind was full. He kept seeing the heavy weariness in Gaede's face. He thought of Unity with a kind of wonder. He had known his share of girls, some of them beautiful, but none had ever reached him deep. Was he trying to build something out of nothing? That's it, he thought, with too much violence. She had been in need, and that appealed to him. It was as simple as that. A mocking voice, inside his head, jeered at him. How about those questions you've been asking yourself? Would she like living on a ranch in Texas? He admitted the voice's right to existence. Thinking of her in Texas was going too fast. A man didn't see a woman just once and start reshaping his future.

He sighed and turned onto his side. A man's life could be simple and direct, and then all of a sudden, it was turned upside down.

Virginia City looked far worse by daylight. She looked like a tired, old bawd after a roisterous night. By daylight, all her frailties showed. Trash littered the streets, and the few solid buildings were ugly and unpainted. It was a hodge-podge city, and people lived in shelters of all kinds, very few of them substantial. He saw a few one-storied, brick buildings and several frame ones. Everything else was tents, tents of all sizes and description. Some of them were big enough to house a business establishment, others were so small that a man had to crawl into them. They were made of every

kind of material, canvas, blankets, even articles of clothing. On a bench of land, higher than Eakin's head, someone had strung two shirts together, stretching them over a line and pulling out the sides to form a meagre shelter. Each breeze stirred the dangling arms. Eakin shook his head. It was a make-shift, unsubstantial way to live, and he compared it to his roots buried deep in Texas soil. No wonder Ferris Gaede had a rough town on his hands. Living under these conditions would scrape the thin veneer of civilization from most men.

He ate a hasty breakfast of fried potatoes, bread and coffee. The potatoes were burned, the bread was old, and he suspected the grounds that made the coffee had been put in the pot a month ago. He was charged a dollar and a half for the meal. This town was full of legal bandits.

By the slant of the sun, he judged it to be after nine. It wasn't too early to check on what progress Unity was making in restoring her business.

She stood at the front of her lot, and her face held a mixture of anger and woe. The tent was still flat. It looked like a squashed insect, with no chance of ever rising again.

She didn't see him until he was beside her. He said, "Good morning."

She started, and a smile replaced the anger and woe. "Good morning, Mr. Eakin."

"You didn't look like you thought so," he said. He had been telling himself he could be wrong, that night and flickering artificial light would be kind to anyone. He had seen tired, dance-hall girls look good, when the light wasn't too strong and cruel to them. He wasn't wrong about her. This woman could stand inspection under any kind of light. Her eye looked more blue this morning, but he was sure there had been a strong cast of green in them, a moment ago. He suspected they would be blazing green, when she was angry.

"It's a terrible morning," she said, and her eyes changed shades. "I had hoped to be open for business by now. I can't get the materials I need."

"Why? Aren't they in town?"



## GUN RICH

The blue in her eyes was almost gone. "Sol Jenkins won't sell them to me."

"He has them?"

She nodded. "He says they're promised to someone else. It might be as long as a month before he can get more shipped in."

Eakin said, "Maybe he might change his mind, if I talked to him. What do you need?"

"A strip of canvas to sew over that rip. And a new main pole." She nibbled at her lower lip. "You can't change his mind."

Eakin said gravely, "I can try. Where's his place of business?"

"That big tent on the corner two blocks down."

Eakin smiled. That was proper. A man selling tents and materials for tents should be housed in a tent. "You'll wait here?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

He touched the brim of his hat. "I'll be right back."

The traffic on the walks was not as heavy as last night, and he could take a full stride. It was as heavy in the streets. It looked as if the ore and lumber wagons never stopped moving. Seeing the working animals reminded him of Stepper. He had to stop at the livery stable and rent more time for his horse, or that toothless, old bandit would probably try to take the animal.

He found Jenkins' place of business without difficulty. Jenkins' prices were crudely printed on a piece of cardboard pinned to the outside of his tent. They took Eakin's breath away. A small tent, barely large enough for a man to sleep in, cost a fortune. A herd of cattle wouldn't buy a large tent.

He stepped inside, and rolled-up and folded tents of all sizes were piled up along the canvas walls. Rope and poles and pegs were thrown into a jumble at the back of the tent. Some of the canvas looked new, some old and rotten. It looked as if Jenkins bought a lot of tents from men, who had made their cast at fortune and lost.

Jenkins was a huge, fat man. He sat in a sagging chair in

the middle of a small, open space in the center of the tent. His face had an oily sheen, and he picked at a back molar with a finger nail.

"Yes?" he growled, without removing the finger. His shirt looked as if it hadn't been washed for a month, and Eakin could smell him from a dozen feet away. He thought of Unity trying to deal with this gross beast, and a slow anger started.

"I want to buy a main tent pole." He looked at the pile of miscellaneous poles and picked out the biggest one. "That one there. And a strip of canvas for repairs."

Jenkins looked at him, and his eyes turned cunning. "It won't do her any good to send you down. I haven't a thing. I told her that."

Eakin moved closer to him. "When will you have it?"

Jenkins shrugged. "Maybe four or five weeks. It takes time to get stuff freighted in here."

Eakin took another step. He was within reaching distance of Jenkins. "Everything in here is sold?"

"Sold," Jenkins growled. "Now get out. I've got things to do."

Eakin seized him by the shirt front. He jerked him to his feet and twisted the material. It cut into Jenkins' fat neck, and Eakin was surprised it didn't tear. "Who paid you to say that?"

Jenkins sputtered a curse at him.

Eakin removed a hand and slashed the back of it across the fat face. "Don't lie to me. Or I'll beat your head off."

He shoved hard, and Jenkins stumbled backwards. He hit the chair and fell over it. It splintered to ruins under his weight.

He fought the wreckage from him, and his eyes were insane with fury. His hand flashed to the back of his neck as he came up to a sitting position.

Eakin had seen other knife men carry their blades in a sheath, hanging down between the shoulder blades. He drew his gun, and his eyes were as cold as the bore of the muzzle, pointing at Jenkins.

## GUN RICH

"Pull it," he said. "Move your hand just a little more, and I'll open your fat gut."

The mottled red left Jenkins' face, leaving it looking like a puffy lump of dough. "Wait a minute," he squalled, his hand falling to his side. "You can't come in here and do as you damn please. We got law in this town."

"Stand up," Eakin ordered. "And back up to me. Keep your hands where I can see them."

When Jenkins finished his movement, that broad rear was temptingly close. Eakin's toe itched. Instead, he reached out and pulled the knife and its sheath clear of Jenkins' shirt. A knife made his flesh crawl. It was such a silent, deadly thing.

He drew the blade and tossed it into a jumble of rope in the far corner. This snake had only one fang to remove. The sheath hung on a leather thong, and Eakin twisted it. The thin leather strip cut cruelly into the fat neck. Jenkins squalled, and his fingers tried to dig the thong from the folds of flesh.

Eakin said softly in his ear, "I can cut your head off with this thong. Who paid you to turn her away?" He doubted the name would mean anything to him, but he wanted to know.

He eased the pressure, and Jenkins panted, "Gibney."

The name surprised Eakin. "Horace Gibney?"

Jenkins nodded. He kept his fingers inside the thong, fearful that the cutting pressure might be applied again.

Eakin frowned. Maybe Gibney sent Kallas, too. Why? He would have to ask Unity about that.

He said, "But you've changed your mind now. You'll sell her anything she needs."

Jenkins bobbed his head. He turned slowly. The hate darkened his eyes.

Eakin said cheerfully, "I'll need that big pole over there. And a strip of canvas." His gun was holstered, and he looked easy-going and harmless.

Jenkins kept rubbing his neck. The white line around it was

disappearing. "I can't," he said, and there was a quaver in his voice. The hating in his eyes was replaced by a fear.

Jenkins was afraid of someone, and it had to be Gibney. Gibney hadn't looked that big to Eakin in last night's poor light. Maybe he'd better change his analysis of the man.

He said, "We can go all through it again."

The hate flickered in Jenkins' eyes. His mouth was filled with curses, but he kept them from slipping out.

He reached behind a pile of good canvas and selected a piece. He handed it to Eakin. It was weather-stained and old.

Eakin ran his thumb through it without effort. He poked a half dozen holes through it, then handed it back without a word.

Jenkins found another piece. Eakin didn't have to test it. The canvas was new. He said, "Watch the price you name, friend."

He saw the fat man change the price he had in mind. The one he said was high, but that was standard for this town.

Eakin picked up his purchases and said, "It's a pleasure to do business with you."

He left Jenkins choking on that. He got to the entrance before Jenkins could find his voice. "This isn't over with yet," Jenkins said.

Eakin turned and looked at him. A knife man with a hating. It was an unpleasant combination. It brought forth a picture of lonely streets and dark nights. Jenkins might find his dark night, but he would have trouble with the lonely street here. Eakin's eyes turned cold. "Don't make me kill you."

It was said with no passion, but it took the color out of Jenkins' face. It might hold him for awhile, until the hating rose up and overpowered the threat.

Unity was still in front of her lot, when Eakin returned. She looked at his purchases, and her eyes went wide. "He sold to you," she said. "Why did he turn me away?"

Eakin shrugged. "Some kind of a mistake, I imagine."

He debated upon getting the tent up first, or putting on the patch. It might be better to erect the tent.

## GUN RICH

He had a hell of a struggle getting that pole in place. The folds of canvas enveloped him, and he thought the weight of it would break his back. He was panting and staggering, when he had the tent erected. He replaced tent pegs and tightened up the guy ropes. He was pretty proud of himself, when the job was done.

He had a lot of work to do, straightening up the interior. The counter was overturned, and two chairs were broken. Then the three foot rip, Kallas had cut, had to be repaired. It was noon before he finished.

Moisture glistened in Unity's eyes. And he suspected she was a woman, who didn't cry readily. She asked, "Why . . ." then bit off the rest of the question. He guessed she was going to say, "Why are you doing all this?" Instead, she said, "I'm grateful, Mr. Eakin. If there's anything I can do to repay you . . ."

He said, "I could stop by for a meal."

Her face was eager. "I can get you something in a few minutes."

He shook his head. "Not now. I'll be by later." He wanted to talk to Gibney. Gibney had meddled in her affairs. Eakin might not find out why, but he could warn Gibney not to meddle again.

He moved out into the stream of traffic. He shouldn't have any trouble locating the Wells Fargo office.

The slopes rose steeply around the town and were covered with man-made scars. He saw brutal slashes in the green that covered the mountain. Man's frantic haste to tear the riches from the earth were evident in the great pyramids of waste rock dumped from the mines. High trestles crossed over the streets, and mule-drawn ore cars were continually carrying more waste to add to the growing piles. Those great piles of rock were crushing nature beneath them. Long after the mines were dead, the piles would be monuments to man's destroying greed.

The slopes were pocked with mine shafts and tunnels, making it look like a man-made prairie dog town. After dark, they would be a menace to a man on foot, or horseback.

## GUN RICH

In a block's walk, he heard three great blasts, from somewhere deep in the earth, and the walk trembled beneath his boots.

Overnight wealth could not tempt him to live in this noise, congestion and confusion. But even if Gaede found and killed Pete's murderer, Eakin would not be content to leave now. He had found another reason to stay in Virginia City. He chuckled as he thought he still didn't know her last name.

He found the Wells Fargo office at the end of Main Street. A crowd swarmed around the depot, and he wondered if all these people sought transportation. He asked a man, standing to his right, and the man shook his head.

"Naw," the man said. "We just came down to watch the show. Those people, standing in front of the door, are going." He spat a brown stream at a crawling insect, covering it with juice. He admired his skill, then said, "This line runs to Reno. It connects there with the main overland stage running between St. Joseph and San Francisco. Never saw so many people wanting to go someplace. Three stages a day leave here, and you still have to book passage in advance." He looked up and said, "Here comes the stage now."

The driver halted the empty stage in front of the office. The six horses were fresh, and they danced in the traces. The strongbox was lifted into the leather-enclosed boot just below the driver's seat. Then the mail sacks were stowed into the boot around the box. The passenger baggage was crammed into the rear enclosure. A half dozen pieces were left over, and they were lashed into place behind the driver.

A ticket clerk yelled at the passengers crowding around the stage door. They gave him reluctant passage, and he escorted two women to their seats in the stage. He stepped nimbly aside as the men passengers made a rush for the remaining space.

Eakin didn't see how it was possible for that many people to cram themselves into such limited space. Eight people crowded into space for six, and Eakin heard the muttered swearing. Even with the crowding, two travelers couldn't find room inside.

## GUN RICH

The ticket clerk gestured to the top of the baggage-covered coach. The two could ride up there, or be left. They climbed to the precarious perch, and jammed their hats down to their ears. They gripped the hand rail with a kind of grim desperation. An armed guard, shotgun swinging from his hand, swung up beside the driver.

"Here it comes," the man, beside Eakin, said.

The driver uncoiled his whip. He let it dangle clear of the coach, then snapped it between the ears of the lead team. The six horses took off in a wild leap. The coach sagged back the full length of its cradle springs, then snapped forward. The passengers were mashed together at the rear end of the coach. The necks of the two men, on top, jerked violently. It was a small miracle their heads stayed on. One of them lost his hat, despite his preparations.

The watching crowd roared in delight. The stage hurtled down the street, took a corner on two wheels, and was out of sight. Dust puffed up from the hoofs and wheels, then settled slowly in a sullen blanket.

Eakin said, "I'd walk before I'd ride that thing."

"Me, too," his companion agreed.

The entire scene showed a callous indifference to the passenger's comfort, or even their safety. If this was typical, it wasn't hard to see why Wells Fargo was unpopular.

Eakin made his way through the dispersing crowd and stepped inside the office. He asked for Gibney, and the ticket clerk shook a bored head. "He's out."

He turned away, showing a complete indifference to being of service. Eakin was tempted to cuff a few manners into him. No wonder people felt hard toward the transportation system. No wonder they had little concern for what happened to it.

Eakin left the office. His resolve hadn't weakened. Gibney was still going to get his warning, but there was little point in hanging around here.

He turned back toward the tent restaurant, discarding one pretext after another for his return. He could say he thought she needed more help and let it go at that.

## GUN RICH

A hand-lettered sign, outside the tent, said, "Open tonight." As Eakin pushed aside the flap he heard angry voices coming from the interior.

He stood just inside the tent, taking in the scene. Gibney had hold of Unity's wrist. She was getting mad. Her eyes were turning green.

Gibney said, "I will not let you go ahead with this, Unity. There's no reason for it."

"Let go of me," she said coldly. "I don't need your advice to run my affairs."

Gibney said passionately, "You will listen to me. You will . . ."

Eakin said mildly, "I'd listen to her, if I were you."

Gibney dropped her wrist and whirled. He was dressed as if he were on a courting call. He wore a long, black coat, black trousers, and a brilliantly flowered vest. The wide brimmed hat was new, and the crisp white shirt looked as if it had just come from the laundry. He saw Eakin, and his face didn't look like a courting face. Hate and frustration darkened his eyes, and his lips were a thin, bitter line. He said stiffly, "This is none of your affair. Stay out of it."

Eakin moved slowly toward him. "Maybe I'm making it my affair. You caused me a lot of work this morning."

He saw the flicker in Gibney's eyes. He could go ahead with his warning. Gibney was behind the attempt to wreck her business.

He said, "Why did you tell Jenkins not to sell her the stuff she needed?"

Fury washed a dull flood of color over Gibney's face. "You're a damned liar," he shouted.

Eakin sounded as if he were engaged in ordinary conversation. "Why would he do that, Unity?"

Her eyes were completely green. "He believes if my business is ruined, I'll have to turn to him."

"Ah," Eakin said in a thoughtful voice. "Then he probably sent Kallas to wreck you. Maybe robbing you was Kallas' idea. Maybe not."

"Goddamn you," Gibney screamed. His face was contorted



## G U N   R I C H

as he sprang forward. He moved much quicker than Eakin thought he could. He saw the blow coming, but he had no time to duck it. It was a good blow, with plenty of authority behind it. It knocked him backward and down, and he lit on his shoulders. He rubbed his throbbing jaw and shook his head to clear the ringing bells from it. He had made a serious mistake. He had judged a man by the clothes he wore, thinking he wasn't dangerous. He came up to a knee and waited as Gibney rushed him. He would not make that mistake again.

## CHAPTER FIVE

GIBNEY RUSHED Eakin and aimed a kick at his head. Eakin threw his body to one side, and Gibney's boot kicked empty air. The furious kick pulled him off balance, and he fell. Eakin scrambled to his feet. The ringing in his head was almost gone.

Unity screamed, "Stop it. Stop . . ."

Eakin flashed her a bleak glance. He couldn't stop something he hadn't started.

He waited until Gibney got on his feet. Now they were starting even. The rage in Gibney made his eyes wild. Eakin intended making that rage work against him.

He said, "It's a shame to mess up those pretty clothes," and glided forward. From now on, he expected no serious trouble. He shot a left hand at the contorted face, and the face wasn't there. It ducked to one side, and the blow slid harmlessly over Gibney's shoulder. Gibney wasn't as wild as he looked. Before the thought was fully formed in Eakin's mind, a set of knuckles landed above his eye. The faint ringing in his head changed to a roaring. The blow also watered his eyes. He revised his opinion upward of Gibney. The man had toughness and strength to go with his quickness.

Eakin fell back a half dozen steps, shaking his head to get the water out of his eyes. He heard Unity's quickened breathing, and his lips pulled back in a tight grin. People, who knew Dan Eakin well, ran for cover, when they saw that grin.

He hadn't laid a finger on Gibney, and he didn't like the proportion this fight was taking. He said almost cheerfully, "Now we'll get down to business."

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He let Gibney come to him, ducking under a clubbing blow and taking the force of the arm on his shoulder. He sank a fist deep into Gibney's belly, hearing the air tear out of his lungs. He piled the right into that furious face. It landed higher than he wanted, but it was still a good blow. It knocked Gibney's head and shoulders back, and he staggered backward for several steps, trying to regain his balance. He lost his struggle and fell, landing heavily upon his shoulders.

Eakin drew on his heaving lungs. His hand stung, and he looked at the bleeding knuckles. He must have hit some teeth with that blow.

Gibney lifted his head. Blood ran from his mouth and dripped off his chin. He shook his head and whimpered as he managed to get to his hands and knees. He tried to crawl toward Eakin, and his movement was weak and uncoordinated. Eakin had seen a lot of fighters like Gibney. They did all right as long as they were throwing all the blows. But the first good one they took finished them.

He looked at Unity and shook his head. He saw her eyes widen in warning. Before her cry came, he jerked his eyes back toward Gibney. Gibney was diving forward from his knees. His movement was positive, and there was no glaze in his eyes.

Eakin said a bitter curse at himself as Gibney's shoulders crashed into his knees. The force drove him backwards, and the back of his head slammed into the ground. The impact was brutal. He felt blood in his mouth and knew he had bitten his tongue. He kept chalking up mistakes by underestimating this man. He had about run his limit of mistakes.

He couldn't keep Gibney from swarming all over him. He felt the sharp thrust of knees along his thighs, and one slammed into his stomach. A thumb dug for his eye, and he jerked his head aside. The thumb nail bit at the eye corner, ripping a tear down his cheek. The pain was sharp and stinging, and it drove the fog wisps out of his mind. He bridged his body, then lashed it to one side, throwing Gibney's weight off of him. A hand grabbed at his shirt and clung,

and he heard material rip. Gibney's heels kicked at him, trying to keep Eakin's legs pinned, and Eakin threshed about like a wounded animal. He flung Gibney's legs clear and rolled. He came to his feet at the same time Gibney did.

They faced each other, lungs pumping for air. Eakin thought, that's all. His quota of mistakes was filled. He was up against a powerful, crazed man. A man, who wanted to maim and kill. Eakin felt some of that impulse, himself, but it was a savagely cold emotion, steadying him.

He let Gibney come to him. He feinted with his left, pulling Gibney's defenses away from his head. He drove his right first into Gibney's exposed face. He beat the face back, and he gave Gibney no time to recover. He was in control now, and he pounded face and body. Gibney sagged visibly. His head rolled, and he pawed with his hands instead of striking with them.

He beat Gibney to his knees, and he could have stopped then, for the fight was over. Gibney's eyes were blank, and his arms hung limply at his sides. He breathed gustily, and each time he exhaled, red bubbles broke at his lips.

Unity seized Eakin's arm. Her face was white as she said, "Don't!"

She wanted him to stop, and he shook her off. He could have lost an eye, and Gibney had ripped open his cheek. Gibney wasn't going to get off with a few surface lacerations. Eakin moved forward, his fist swinging at the end of the stride. It was a brutal blow with leverage and momentum, and Gibney was defenseless. Eakin felt the shock of the punch run the length of his arm and through his shoulder.

Gibney's head flew back, and his eyes rolled up into his head. His mouth was a round O, and his escaping breath sounded like a long, tired sigh. He pitched forward on his face, and not a muscle stirred.

Eakin rubbed his knuckles absently. That should have been his first punch. It would have saved everybody a lot of drain. Now that the fight was over, he could feel the stimulus of it flow from his body, leaving his muscles flaccid. He was

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afraid to look at her, fearing to see revulsion at his brutality in her face.

"Jesus," somebody said in an awed whisper, "I thought his head was going to fly off with that last punch."

Eakin looked toward the entrance. The flap was back, and men were packed in the opening. He saw other men, back of the first line, jumping up and down to get a better view. The noise of the fight had drawn quite an audience.

He scowled at them, and belligerence was in his out-thrust jaw. His attitude asked, do any of you want to pick up Gibney's quarrel? He saw no takers, and the weariness came back, putting a droop in his shoulders. He didn't like those men looking from him to Gibney, then to Unity and putting an inference on what they saw.

He said harshly, "It's over. Clear out. All of you."

He started to move toward them. He couldn't handle all of them but he could try.

He heard a gruff voice say, "Make way. Goddamn it, move." Men were shoved aside, and Ferris Gaede came into sight. He ducked through the opening, and his eyes went startled as he saw Eakin. He looked from Eakin to the unconscious man in the dust, and he managed to keep the questions in his eyes from showing too openly.

Eakin made a slight motion of his head, and Gaede caught its meaning. He whirled on the men, trying to press in behind him and roared, "Clear out. Every damned one of you." He pushed at men, reversing their forward movement. He cursed and shoved until he got them moving. He checked the last two and pointed at Gibney. "Carry him to Doc Poin-dexter. He can stand some patching up." He was silent as the two men carried the limp form out of the tent.

He looked at Eakin and said, "You're building yourself quite a reputation, aren't you. Last night, it was Kallas. This morning, it's Gibney." He sounded like a gruff, hostile lawyer, resenting anyone who wrecked the peace in his town, but his eyes were worried.

Eakin shrugged. "They got in my way."

Gaede said with real exasperation, "Maybe I'd better lock you up."

Unity flared into speech. "You will not," she cried. "He didn't do anything. Horace hit him first."

Gaede swung his eyes to her. "Why?" he growled.

Color showed in her face, but her voice was steady enough. "Horace insisted upon carrying a personal matter too far. Mr. Eakin stopped him."

Gaede stared at her for a long moment. The color increased in her face, but she didn't shift her eyes. Gaede looked at Eakin and asked, "What's your business here, anyway?"

He recognized Eakin's reticence to talk before her, but he wanted information.

Eakin grinned. "I was thinking of getting a job driving for Gibney. I guess that's gone now." That was all he could tell Gaede at the moment. He would have to arrange to talk with him later.

The trouble grew in Gaede's eyes. He didn't like the lone road Eakin was riding. He said, "You keep out of trouble. You hear me?"

"Sure," Eakin said cheerfully.

Gaede said a low oath and whirled and plunged through the tent opening. He swept the flap aside with a savage sweep of his arm. It fluttered for a long while after he was gone.

Eakin said gravely, "I'll be going now." He didn't want to, but it was probably better. It wasn't good for a woman to see two men trying to beat each other's brains out.

She said, "You will not. You're hurt."

He touched the rip in his cheek. It was still bleeding. His touch started the stinging all over.

"Not bad," he said. He probed with his eyes and saw confusion in her face. The pulse at the base of her throat picked up a rapid, irregular beat.

She tried to say it firmly, but her voice faltered at the end, and she would not look at him. "You'll let me take care of that scratch."

Maybe he should limp to the bench she pointed out, but

that would be carrying it too far. She bathed the tear in his cheek and the cut on his mouth. Her face was serious and intent, and she didn't wince at the sight of blood. Her fingers were soft and competent. Eakin was sorry he didn't have more hurts for her to administer to.

She asked, "Did you enjoy fighting with him?"

Puzzled, he stared at her. He didn't like the tone of the question, and he said crisply, "He started it. Or did you want me to let him have his way with you?"

The blush mounted clear up to her hair line, and he felt the shaking in her fingers. "But he was whipped. Wasn't that enough?"

He felt a stab of disappointment. She did feel something for Gibney, or she wouldn't be showing this concern.

"I tried to knock his head off," he said savagely. "He tricked me enough. I'm kinda funny. I always get mad, when somebody tries to gouge out an eye."

He stood and touched his cheek. The bleeding had stopped. "Thanks for the nursing," he said and strode toward the entrance.

She ran after him and caught his arm. "You mustn't think I'm not grateful," she said.

"Are you?" His eyes searched her face. Maybe she was, but he wasn't convinced.

She shuddered and said, "There's so much violence in this city. He won't forgive you for that beating."

Gibney probably wouldn't. The thought rested as lightly on Eakin as a snowflake. He frowned as he searched for the right words, wanting her to understand.

He said, "This town is new and raw—and rich. A man's got to claw out his elbow room, or get trampled under." He sighed and gave it up. A woman could never understand a man's view on this. A man had to keep his gun and his fists ready. A woman didn't need them.

He said, "I'm obliged to you," and started to turn.

She gave him a sudden smile, the more radiant because of its unexpectedness. "You still haven't collected your meal."

A slow, warm grin broke over his face. "Now that would

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make me obliged, Miss . . ." He laughed and said, "I haven't been able to learn your last name."

She joined in his laughter and said, "Voss. Unity Voss."

He liked the sound of it. He suspected he would have liked any name, as long as it belonged to her.

"I'll be back this evening." He walked toward the flap, brushed it aside, and stepped outside. He had come a long way to help Ferris Gaede find a man. Maybe he had found something else. Maybe he had found a woman.



## CHAPTER SIX

GARNEY McNIE sat in Gibney's office and listened to his swearing. His eyes gleamed every time he looked at Gibney's face, and it was an effort to keep his own face straight. Gibney's face showed the marks of rough usage. I wish he'd have stamped your head off, McNie thought viciously.

McNie sat in the chair beside the desk, his hands crossed comfortably on his fat stomach. Gibney had taken a worse beating of spirit than of flesh. That always happened, when a man set his sights on one woman—particularly, when that woman wasn't available. But Gibney was determined that the Voss woman was going to marry him. By the marks on his face that determination should be weakening. McNie admitted she was a desirable bit. But a man was crazy to think there was only one woman in the world. Not when a few dollars would pick him out a pretty choice specimen right here in Virginia City. Like Cora, for instance, though he was getting a little tired of her. He would still pick her over Unity Voss. He liked his women with more padding, particularly when it was distributed in the proper places.

Gibney said furiously, "I'll fix him, Goddamn him."

McNie shook his head. "It might be smarter to let him alone."

Gibney whirled on him. "When I want your advice, I'll ask for it."

McNie's face went still. Only his eyes showed the anger racing through his body. Gibney was getting high and mighty to use that tone to him. One of these days, he wouldn't need Gibney, then . . . He abandoned the thought

regretfully. As long as they were in this operation, he would need Gibney. Where else could he get the information about the bullion shipments? But by God, Gibney had better change his tone.

He was a big man, with fat larding his body. He waddled when he walked, and he knew people made derisive remarks about him. The remarks didn't bother him. No one expected a fat man to be capable of much. Even Cora was amused when he first went after her. She wasn't amused now.

His eyes were heavy-lidded, giving him a sleepy look. The look fooled a lot of people. He had no pretenses, no affectations. He scorned the clothes Gibney wore. He owned the biggest saloon in Virginia City, and it was a money maker. But it wasn't enough. Not when all that wealth was flowing out of the hills around here. But dig for it? McNie scorned the idea. Let the fools sweat for it. He would find a way to take it from them. He had been bitten once, when he had taken in that worthless claim on a gambling debt. It galled him, when he thought of that mistake. Even though it had turned into a profitable mistake, he regretted he wasn't the one, who had seen how to use it.

He took a cigar out of the humidor. Gibney smoked good cigars. He bit off the end and spit it on the floor.

Gibney scowled at him. "McNie, you are a pig."

McNie's face didn't change. He had taken remarks like that before from Gibney. He merely added this one to his account against Gibney.

Oh, the man was smart enough. McNie admitted it reluctantly. Gibney had seen those bullion shipments leaving by Wells Fargo and had figured out a way to divert some of them into their hands without danger. But it didn't make him God.

Gibney made another turn of the room, then stopped and stabbed a finger at McNie. "And another thing. I've told you to keep away from this office unless it's absolutely necessary."

McNie's face went stubborn. Gibney's order was more abrasive grinding into his hide. Caution was all right, but

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Gibney carried it to extremes. Hell, there was nothing to fear. Hadn't Gaede poked around for six months without coming up with a thing?

He said, "Hadn't you better put your mind on business? The bars are piling up in the tunnel. The boys are beginning to grumble. They want their cut now."

"They'll get it, when I say so," Gibney snapped.

McNie's eyes were bleak. We might decide to take all of it, he thought. Where would you be then? He didn't entertain the thought seriously. He wasn't ready to get rid of Gibney yet. Not when all that bullion was waiting to be shipped out on the stages. But Gibney had better come down to earth.

It was a clever scheme and a completely workable one. Gibney had approached him shortly after McNie had acquired that worthless claim. He had flared, when Gibney mentioned it, thinking it was more of the riding he had been receiving on it. Gibney had calmed him down by asking, "What if I can show you how to turn it to a fat profit?"

McNie had listened. It was well-worth listening to. Gibney knew in advance, when every shipment of bullion was to be made. A road agent wouldn't have to guess which stages carried the heavily laden strong boxes.

He had been scornful at first. Anybody could successfully hold up the stages. But what was he going to do with the loot? Those bars were heavy, and it would take pack animals or wagons to move them. If the pack animals or wagons weren't seen and reported, who would buy those bars? Each was stamped with its particular mine brand.

Gibney had asked, "If I show you how, are you interested?"

McNie had been interested. His worthless mine suddenly became a profitable one. They had marketed six bars of gold and silver, and there were close to a couple of hundred more hidden in the tunnel, waiting to be remelted and re-branded. He appreciated caution, but what good did gold, or silver do a man, hidden in a tunnel?

That wasn't his reasoning. He could wait, and Gibney could wait, but to the men they hired to do the actual

holdups, waiting was a dragging weight, only to be eased by more money. The fact they would spend it in the same stupid way, either drinking or gambling, made no difference. The men wanted it; they thought they had a right to it.

He said, "I thought we might work in a few extra bars this week."

Gibney's lips thinned. "We'll increase it, when I say so. If that's all you've got on your mind, I'm busy."

McNie stared at the floor. Here was that Goddamned high-handedness again. "What about the new men we need?"

That shoot-out, at the mine last week, was bad. He didn't regret the loss of Celso, or Burl, but replacing them was going to be troublesome. It wouldn't have happened, he thought, if Celso had had a little more money in his pocket. Celso had gone broke at the poker table and had accused Burl of cheating. Both men were too near even to jump each other. Both men wound up dead.

Gibney breathed hard. "I'll take care of it when I get around to it."

Anger made McNie's collar tight. Gibney never relinquished a detail. McNie could pick a good man as well as Gibney could.

He said, "We're short-handed. You and I will have to ride, if we don't get some replacements." Gibney hadn't been in an actual holdup for several months. That was beneath him now.

Gibney said, "How many times do I have to tell you I'll take care of it?"

McNie pushed to his feet and walked to the door. Gibney stared out of the window with a brooding look on his face. It looked as if his talk with McNie was already gone from his mind.

McNie resented that. He wanted to rake Gibney. A way popped into his mind. He grinned as he said, "Why don't you hire the man who worked you over. He looks like he can do a capable job."

The unrestrained fury in Gibney's face made McNie wish

he had held his tongue. "You keep your Goddamned mouth shut," Gibney yelled. "You keep . . ." He found control and lowered his voice. He stared at McNie a long moment. "Garney," he said. "Don't push beyond your worth."

McNie threw up a placating hand. "Horace, I was just making a bad joke."

"Get out," Gibney said in a low, savage voice.

McNie's haste to obey the order showed in the haste with which he fumbled with the door. He closed it behind him and leaned against it. He was glad Gibney couldn't see the sweat beading his forehead.

Gibney stared at the closed door. He was going to have to kill McNie one of these days. Every week, the thought took more tangible form. He slammed his fist against the wall in an excess of frustration. All his life he had been poor until this scheme occurred to him. It was working just as he knew it would, and McNie dared to question him. He had to use pigs like McNie and the others. He had to use them to make his dream of wealth come true. That was only part of his dream. Unity Voss was the other. His thoughts twisted in torment as he thought of her. Why couldn't he be content with another woman? He had asked himself that a thousand times. Sometimes, he hated her for her indifference to him. But the hating faded under the weight of the longing. He would have forced her to him, if that stranger hadn't arrived. His hands hurt with their clenching. She would have come rushing to him for help, if that stranger hadn't stepped between them. He would take care of the man, but he had to give it some thought.

He sat down at the desk and stared at the far wall. He needed clear thinking, unpushed by anger. It would be best, if he had no part in it. It could get back to Unity, and who knew how a woman would react? It might sour her forever on him. Then too, there was Gaede. Gibney wanted not even the slightest of investigations to touch him. He thought for several minutes, then nodded. He could arrange it. The stranger would be dead, and nobody could trace it back to Horace Gibney.

## GUN RICH

It was dark, when Gibney walked into Sol Jenkins' tent. The level in the bottle before Jenkins said he was drunk. The canvas walls did little to mute the traffic noise. At dark, Virginia City came to full, roisterous life. The noise of restless feet, seeking diversion, would go into dawn.

Jenkins said sullenly, "Don't go jumping me. He pulled a gun and took what he wanted." He supposed Gibney would want the fifty dollars back. By God, he wasn't going to get it without an argument.

He took another drink, and the warm wash of liquor gave him courage. He wiped his mouth, peered slyly at Gibney, and said, "I hear you didn't do so well with him, either."

Gibney sprang forward and seized Jenkins by the shirt front. He twisted it, and the material cut into Jenkins' fat neck. Jenkins squalled and clawed at the hand. This was twice in a day that this had happened to him.

He stared into those maniacal eyes and thought, the man's crazy. A weakening fear put slack into his muscles. He whimpered, "I didn't mean anything by it. I was just funning you."

Gibney let go of him. He said coldly, "Don't ever make a remark like that to me again."

Jenkins rubbed his neck. He couldn't quite meet Gibney's eyes.

"Have you seen him tonight?" Gibney asked.

Jenkins nodded. "About twenty minutes ago. I saw him go into her restaurant."

"Ah," Gibney said. He breathed hard, and that maniacal gleam was in his eyes again.

It's her, Jenkins thought. That stranger's moved in on him, and it's driving him crazy.

Gibney asked, "How would you like to make five hundred dollars?" He laid the money on the table and fanned it out with his hand. The five bills were a beautiful sight in the lamp light. Jenkins couldn't take his eyes off them.

The increased tempo of his breathing gave his "How?" a whistling sound.

## GUN RICH

"You haven't any count to be fond of him," Gibney said.

Jenkins glanced from the money to Gibney. He didn't have any cause at all to like that stranger. Getting even with him had lain in the back of his mind all day. Now Gibney was offering him pay for it.

Gibney reached for the money. "If you don't want it . . ."

Jenkins' hand was the quickest. It covered the bills. "I want it." His curiosity pushed questions to his tongue. He was wise enough not to voice them.

"Tonight," Gibney said. He made it an order.

Jenkins nodded. Five hundred dollars was a lot of money. The curious questions kept running through his mind. Why didn't Gibney do it, himself? Fear of the stranger? Maybe. Or wanting to keep out of it because of the woman? That was more likely.

He watched Gibney leave the tent. That stranger was fast with a gun. He knew that by experience. But without warning, all that quickness would be useless. A knife was a silent, deadly thing. Jenkins bared his teeth in a wicked grin. He would wait outside the restaurant until the big man came out. He would follow him all evening, if necessary, until he found the location he wanted. He was still grinning as he folded the five bills lovingly into his shirt pocket.

Eakin was sorry when the meal ended. Unity had closed the restaurant, refusing admission to two latecomers. She had eaten with him, and she was a good cook. Eakin suspected the steak had come off a tired, old cow, but she had done something to it, making it as tender a piece of beefsteak as he had ever eaten. It wouldn't have mattered, if she had served him shoe leather. Sitting across from her was enough.

He said, "I won't get rich overnight, Unity." Somewhere during the meal, it had become Unity and Dan, and it seemed as natural as though they had known each other for months. "But it's a better life than living in a city like this. A man's progress might be slow, but he can see it. And it's solid progress. It can't be swept away overnight. Have you ever seen Texas?"

## GUN RICH

She shook her head, and he said, "It's big country." He was silent for a moment, searching for the words to make her see Texas as he saw it. He wanted to tell her about the magnificent sweep of the country, of how the stars looked at night.

He laughed suddenly and said, "Good Lord, I've been talking about myself all evening."

She smiled and said, "I've been doing a lot of talking myself, Dan."

He knew her father had been killed in a mining accident, that the claim was worthless. He knew the accident had left her all alone, that she had made it on her own. He liked that fierce streak of independence in a woman. His observation was limited, but he had noticed that when an independent woman gave, she gave completely.

He asked, "And the future, Unity? Are you content to do this from now on?"

She shrugged. "I started this, hoping to be able to get through the first day. That's all I'm planning on now. Just one day at a time."

"And no other plans? Plans for somebody like Gibney?"

She met his gaze steadily enough. "He's pressed me hard to marry him. The answer has always been no. Maybe there's something about him I distrust."

Eakin felt a deep satisfaction. "He won't bother you again."

"And you, Dan? Will you be going back soon?" An unasked question was in her eyes. Virginia City was a long way from Texas. If he loved that land so much, what was he doing here?

He was tempted to tell her, but he held it. The reason belonged to him and Gaede. He stood and said, "Soon, I hope." He thought she expects some explanation and said, "I came here to meet a friend. I won't wait much longer for him." He had always been a poor liar, and the words came out lamely. He caught the subtle stiffening in her face. His evasiveness hadn't escaped her.

She walked with him to the tent entrance, and he stood a moment, looking at her. Lord, how he wanted to kiss her.



## GUN RICH

He said abruptly, "Good-night, Unity," and plunged through the opening. A restlessness drove him, and he turned his steps away from his hotel. The thought of that lonely room had a depressing quality. He had two other choices. He could drink, or he could gamble. What he wanted to do was to go back and talk to her.

He moved toward the outskirts of town, wanting to get away from the crowd. It was quiet here, and he stopped to roll a cigarette. He lit it and drew deeply. Don't try to rush things, he told himself. Take it just like she has . . . one day at a time. He watched the moon come up over the pine trees. It fought a losing battle with the shadows of the trees. It wasn't a Texas moon. It wasn't as big, nor as mellow. He was grinning, when he heard the soft stirring of air beside his cheek. The motion had sound. It sounded like a small sigh. He had heard that same motion and sound once before, down on the border, when a Mexican had thrown a knife at him. That one had been close enough, and this one was even closer.

He could almost swear the cold blade had kissed his cheek. He heard the thwack as the blade buried into something solid. He whirled and drew, seeing the black bulk of a figure some twenty feet behind him. He aimed and fired in an instinctive reflex, and the figure gave a strangled cry, took a staggering step, then collapsed.

Eakin waited warily, then approached the figure, his gun ready for any movement from it. That instinctive shot had been good. The inert mass never stirred.

It lay on its face, and he toed it over. It flopped over with a limpness that told him the man was dead. Eakin lifted his head and listened. He listened for a long moment. If his shot had been heard, it seemed to be drawing no attention.

He stooped and peered at the dead face. He frowned as he straightened. Jenkins must have been a touchy man to have resented Eakin's handling this much. Or had Jenkins been sent after him? Gibney's name popped into his mind. He considered the possibility, then nodded. It could fit.

## GUN RICH

He put the gun away and turned back toward the business district. Gaede had to know about this.

He didn't want to use Gaede's front door, and he found an alley that ran behind his office. He moved along it, counting the buildings. This should be Gaede's door.

He tapped on it lightly, hoping Gaede was alone. If Gaede wasn't, he could fade away, then return later. He thought Gaede had missed the light sound of his tap and was ready to knock again, when the door opened.

"Who is it?" Gaede asked testily. "Why don't you use the front door?"

"You alone, Ferris?" Eakin asked.

Gaede said, "Dan," and stepped aside. He closed the door and said, "What are you up to now?"

Eakin said soberly, "Ferris, I just killed a man."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

EAKIN WAITED twenty minutes before Gaede returned. Gaede locked the door behind him and said, "He was still there. If somebody doesn't find him tonight, I'll bring him in in the morning. It's Jenkins."

Eakin knew that. He asked, "Was he the kind of a man to resent hard handling? Would he try to knife me for it?"

Gaede said irritably, "How do I know?" He squinted at Eakin. "I know one thing. You're here a couple of days, and half the town's mad at you."

Eakin grinned. He didn't correct Gaede's exaggeration. But he only knew of two people. And one of them is dead, he thought soberly.

Gaede pulled money from his pocket and laid it on the desk. Eakin stared at five one-hundred dollar bills.

"He had it in his shirt pocket," Gaede said. He stared morosely at the money. "Jenkins drank and gambled away everything he got. He never had this much money at one time in his life. You know what I think? I think somebody paid Jenkins to kill you."

"Gibney," Eakin said. Gibney had enough hatred, but did he have this kind of money? He asked, "Does his job pay that well that he can put out five hundred dollars?"

Worry made Gaede's voice edgy. "How do I know?"

"Ferris, maybe he's the man behind your holdups." The idea stirred excitement in Eakin. "He's in a perfect spot to know the value of every shipment and when it leaves."

Gaede said testily, "You think I haven't thought of that?" He was a competent lawman. He resented any implication he didn't know his job.

## GUN RICH

His frown didn't bother Eakin. Sometimes, even a good man missed what was right under his nose. He asked, "What do you know about Gibney?"

"I've checked him out." Gaede's frown deepened. An amateur always thought that the first idea that hit him was a good one. Eakin's attention would turn to Gibney because of his fight with him. He said, "He wears good clothes. His job could pay for them. He rides fine horses."

Eakin picked up the plural. "Horses?" he repeated.

Gaede nodded. "He's got a little piece of land five miles out of town. He trades horses as a hobby. He even makes a little money out of that. It doesn't make him a suspect."

"It might," Eakin said. "Nobody can remember the horses the road agents used. Gibney might be getting them new horses."

"I've thought of that, too," Gaede said gloomily. "I can't tie him in anywhere along the line. You can't arrest a man because he wears good clothes and deals in good horses. It won't hold up, Dan."

He saw the stubborn set of Eakin's jaw, and his voice raised. "Show me what they do with the bullion. Show me how they move those heavy bars without being seen. Then maybe I'll listen to you."

He made a weary gesture. "Hell, Dan. You're going over ground I've been over."

"Maybe," Eakin said. "But I'll look around. I'll see you tomorrow night. Around nine." He grinned as he moved toward the rear door. "Maybe I'll go tell Gibney I'm sorry. Maybe he'll give me that job I wanted."

"You watch yourself, Dan." Gaede had no proof, but Gibney could have set Jenkins on Eakin. He had no proof of anything, and it was driving him crazy.

He said, "I'll talk to Gibney. I'll warn him . . ."

"Don't. Let him worry about what happened. I'll be careful, Ferris." He thought of Unity and smiled. "I'd kind of like to stick around for a while."

The door closed softly behind him. The shadows were

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deep in the alley. He wished he knew whether or not Jenkins was on his own. The lack of information made a man tense.

He went to the livery stable in the morning, and the old man gave him the broken-toothed grin. "You owe me for yesterday," he said. "I was getting ready to take over your horse."

"I'll bet you were, you old bandit. Maybe I'd better pay a few days in advance."

The old man cackled as Eakin counted coins into his hand. "I told you this town was tough. I hear you already killed one man and beat up Gibney."

Eakin knew a flash of alarm. Then he realized the old man was referring to Kallas. He said, "He killed himself. I didn't have anything to do with it."

"You watch Gibney," the old man said seriously. "He isn't apt to forget a beating."

Eakin supposed everybody in town knew about it by now. It was going to make it harder to get anywhere near Gibney. He nodded and said, "Bring me my horse."

Stepper was in fine spirits after the rest. He danced and snorted with pleasure at the sight of Eakin. As Eakin swung into the saddle, the old man said, "I wish I knew what you're up to, Mister. You don't belong in this town. When you rode in, I knew trouble rode in for someone."

Eakin fixed him with a morose glance. "You talk too much."

"Sure," the old man said cheerfully. "It's all I got left."

Eakin rode out of town on the road to Reno. Could the old man have some connection with this? Besides selling rental space, most stables would buy or sell a horse, where there was a profit involved. Eakin was convinced the road agents were using a fresh turnover of mounts. That was the answer as to why nobody ever recognized one of their horses. The passengers, during a holdup, might be too excited to identify an animal, but the driver was a man used to horses. He would notice a horse before he would the holdup man. The road agents were using different horses each time. That had to be the answer. But where did they come from? Eakin

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sighed as he mulled over his meager facts. A man could go crazy groping around in this maze.

This was quite a job of road building, for there was little level ground. In places, the road had been cut into the face of the mountains. Long fills crossed the gorges, and Eakin could visualize the countless teams and wagons used to haul in those fills. This road would be a holdup man's heaven. Eakin saw a half dozen places where the steep grades would slow the coaches down to a walk.

He let Stepper pick his own pace. He rode along trying to see this road through a holdup man's eyes. If he were doing it, he wouldn't pick any of the grades he had seen. A man would be unable to leave the road because of the rough country on both sides of it. No agent would want to stick to the road after the coach had been looted. He would want to get under cover as quickly as he could. No, the more likely spots would be on the long grades over the more rounded hills. The one ahead, for example. A man could leave the road on either side, climbing to the left, descending to the right. In a hundred yards, the wilderness swallowed him.

Halfway up the next grade, Eakin turned Stepper off the road. He turned uphill, curious about the numerous black patches that dappled the hillside. He reached the first one within two hundred yards. The black patch, seen from the road, was the shadowy opening of a mine tunnel. He twisted in the saddle, counting the patches of shadows nearby. He could see a dozen in the vicinity. His eyes gleamed as the thought struck him.

He turned Stepper and headed downhill. He crossed the road, and below it, he found the same condition. The entire hillside was dotted with tunnels and shafts. Everywhere he looked, he saw the black patches indicating man's tearing at the earth's crust.

He rolled a cigarette as he thought about it. This must have been one of the unprofitable hills, for he saw no sign of activity. The hillside was left in silent brooding, scarred by the transient passage of man. This could be the answer

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as to how the road agents handled those heavy bars. He wanted to talk to Gaede about it.

He was at the rear door of Gaede's office at nine o'clock. Gaede was waiting for him, for he opened the door at the first tap.

Gaede growled, "You come up with any new bright ideas?"

"Maybe," Eakin said and walked to the desk. He took Gaede's chair and put his feet up on the desk. He laced his fingers across his stomach and shut his eyes.

Gaede knocked his feet off the desk. Eakin opened his eyes and grinned at the outrage on Gaede's face.

His grin wiped some of the outrage away, and Gaede said, "Don't bait me, boy. I'm in no mood for it."

"Maybe I found out how the bars are handled, Ferris."

He waited, and Gaede said, "I can choke it out of you."

Eakin laughed. "I won't horse you any more, Ferris. I rode out along the Reno road today. I think I know what they're doing with the bullion right after the holdup. They put it down an old mine shaft or tunnel until the excitement clears away. They can come back a week, or a month later and pack it away. Everybody's looking for pack trains or wagons right after the holdup."

Gaede's face was still for a long moment, then he swore. "It has to be. I've been a blind fool not to have thought of it before."

Eakin thought it best not to rag him any more. Gaede's nerves were worn thin, and his body was weary.

Gaede paced back and forth before the desk. "But what do they do with it later?" he asked. "Saying you've guessed right, it doesn't push us a step forward. We don't know when the next holdup will happen. We'd have a long wait sitting beside one of those holes, even if we picked the right one."

Eakin knew Gaede wasn't seriously considering what he'd just said. He said, "They'll have plans for disposing of the bullion. Maybe they're re-smelting it, then turning it out as bullion from a new mine." He was fumbling his way along.

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He didn't know enough about mining to make a positive statement.

Gaede's eyes turned excited and some of the heaviness disappeared from his face. "You've hit it. And I never thought of it at all."

"Have any of the mines increased their shipments a lot?"

Gaede shook his head. "All I know of are running about the same as they were for the past months. If anybody's feeding it in with their regular stuff, they're doing it slow."

He stared at the floor, and Eakin could almost see the thought form, then be rejected.

"Garney McNie," Gaede said explosively. "He runs a saloon on C Street. He took a claim on a gambling debt, and it turned out to be worthless. He took a lot of riding about it. Everybody said he ought to know better than to take a claim that far from the lode. But a couple of months ago, he shipped two bars of silver and again last month. It started a new rush all around him, but nobody else found anything. McNie's boasting he found a small but rich vein."

"Could he be our man?"

Gaede thought a moment. "He could be. He's money-hungry." The gloomy cast came back to his face. "Guessing isn't proof."

"I'll ride out and poke around," Eakin said.

"And get your head blown off. McNie keeps his property guarded. That's no sign of guilt. I don't know of a mine in the Comstock that doesn't have certain drifts guarded. If they're onto valuable ore, the insiders want a chance to gobble up all the stock before the secret leaks out. McNie's actions might be suspicious, but it's not proof."

Eakin lit a cigarette and watched smoke spiral toward the ceiling. He squinted at it and said, "Maybe I can get in with McNie. He might be looking for another hand."

Gaede said harshly. "No. If McNie's the man we want and he even got a suspicion about you, how long do you think you'd last? I wouldn't have time to even think about helping you."

Eakin asked gently, "Do you know of anything else?"



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Gaede pondered it. "No," he said reluctantly.

Eakin put his feet under him. "We'll play it this way and see what opens up. If you get a trouble call from McNie's saloon, you don't know me. Handle me the way you would anybody else."

"I ought to stop you," Gaede said. "For God's sake, watch yourself. You're walking blindfolded in a black alley."

Eakin said, "I will," and walked toward the back door. He was disappointed that this was pointing at McNie and not at Gibney. Gibney's name still stuck in his mind. The timing of the holdups was too exact. Gaede had said that every stage that was hit carried a valuable load. That information had to come from someone. Eakin thought; from someone at the Wells Fargo office.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

McNIE'S SALOON occupied the first floor of a large frame building. The raw lumber was shrinking, and wind blew through the cracks between the boards. This room must be hell to heat during the wintertime. The sawdust on the floor, hadn't been changed for weeks, and it showed, dark patches of spilled liquor and tobacco juice. The place had a sour, stale smell. Three hanging kerosene lamps illuminated the rough plank bar. The chimneys needed cleaning. Other hanging lamps gave the card tables a poor light. If a man let whisky fog his sight too much, he wouldn't be able to see the spots on the cards.

McNie did a rushing business. The bar was crowded. Eakin didn't see a space where a man could elbow his way in. The tables were equally crowded. A dozen girls worked the floor, stopping at a table to tickle a man under the chin, or taking a sip from his glass. Their dresses showed more life and youth than their faces. The poor light was kind to them, but even that kindness, plus the paint on their faces couldn't hide the bone-deep weariness. Eakin felt a moment's pity for them. What happened to them in a few years from now, when the last of their youth had been spent? He shrugged the thought away. They'd picked their path.

One of them came up and tugged at his arm. "Buy me a drink, honey." She gave him her best wheedling, both in voice and smile. She had applied her make-up with too lavish a hand, and the low cut of her dress exposed too much breast. Eakin might have been curt in his refusal, but the desperate weariness in her eyes stopped him.

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"I can't," he said and smiled. "I'm broke."

She gave him sharp appraisal, but she must have taken his statement as truth, for she turned away without further interest. Eakin grinned inwardly. The fastest way for a man to shake these harpies was to tell them he had no money.

He found a space against the far wall and leaned against it. His eyes swept the room. He saw no one that answered Gaede's description of Garney McNie. He was content to wait. Sooner or later, McNie would walk into this room.

He must have been standing there for at least fifteen minutes before the door, at the end of the bar opened. Eakin spotted McNie immediately. The man was immense. He waddled as he walked, and his jowls sagged. It was apparent McNie lived for his eating. His stomach bulged his waistcoat in a half-dozen rolls. His eyes were small and porcine in a dull, round face. His black hair was thinning, and he wore it plastered down across his skull.

Eakin knew a quick disappointment. This man didn't look clever enough to mastermind an operation as big as the stealing appeared to be. Still, he would make no snap decision on surface judgement. A man's appearance was never any indication as to what went on in his head.

McNie made a tour of the room, laughing with this man and slapping another on the back. He seemed popular enough. He was within six feet of Eakin, when one of the girls stopped him. This woman had once been beautiful, though the remnants of beauty were fading fast. There was a puffiness in her face that could come from too much liquor, and her eyes were harried. She still had a ripe figure. Eakin looked at her breasts, spilling out from the tight confinement of her low-cut dress. Too ripe, he thought. She had a false, gay smile on her face as she ran her fingers along McNie's jawbone. It was an intimate gesture, deeper than just casual familiarity.

McNie slapped the hand away. Eakin saw the woman's face go very still. McNie said something to her that Eakin couldn't catch, then turned and walked toward his office. The woman hesitated a moment, then followed him. The door

closed behind her. Eakin would have given a lot to be able to hear their conversation.

McNie looked up from his desk at Cora Benning. He said testily, "I've told you before. Keep your hands off me out there."

She stood with her shoulders pressed hard against the door, her head thrown high. "You mean anywhere, don't you?"

McNie gave her a long, speculative look. He remembered how Cora had been at first, how hard he had worked to get her. He had spent a lot of time and money on her, and at the moment, he couldn't say it had been worth it. But a man got an idea, and he had to know. He almost grinned at the thought. It was the other way around now. She was pursuing him, trying hard to hold onto what she was once positive she held in her hands. He enjoyed this new role.

He said indifferently, "Have it anyway you want it." He realized suddenly that he was tired of her. A woman always became possessive. When it happened, they thought they owned a man. If he even so much as looked at another woman, Cora's lips became a tight, pinched line. He remembered a few months back, how much he had wanted this woman. No longing stirred in him as he looked at her. It was over, he decided. The sooner she learned it, the better off they would both be.

He said softly, "Cora, why don't you find another job."

Her lips parted as she gasped. She stood rigid a moment as if she were fighting off the meaning of the words. Then her face crumbled and broke, and she looked old and tired. She came toward the desk, her hands outstretched.

"Garney, you don't mean that."

He said brutally, "I mean it." He remembered all his work in getting this woman. Once, he had even thought it would take the offer of marriage. Money had done the trick, but he had never been completely satisfied. A woman's submission wasn't enough. A man wanted something else from her. Her respect, for instance. Several times, he had been tempted to

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tell her about his and Gibney's operation; he had been tempted to brag and let her know how really clever he was. He had resisted the temptation, and now he was glad he had. She had no hold of any kind on him. He was superior to Gibney in that respect. He never became completely obsessed by any one woman.

He watched the tragic fight she was making show on her face. He lit a cigar and leaned back, enjoying his mastery of the moment.

She said passionately, "You'll be sorry for this."

He threw back his head and laughed. There wasn't a thing she could do. He said, "Get out, Cora." He pulled a hundred dollars from his pocket and shoved it across the desk at her.

Her nostrils pinched tight with the rush of her breathing. She stared at the money, then at him. She was trying to pull the remnants of her pride about her, and it was a pitiful, shredded garment. She spat a curse at him, whirled and ran out of the office.

McNie chuckled as he repocketed the money. That little display had just cost her a hundred dollars.

Eakin saw the woman plunge out of McNie's office. Her eyes were open and staring, but she looked blind. One of the other girls tried to stop her, and the woman brushed by her. Eakin doubted the woman even heard her. He waited until he saw that she was leaving, then followed her out the front door.

He caught up with her halfway down the block and touched her shoulder. She whirled like a cat, and her teeth were bared.

"Get away from me," she said passionately.

He said, "I saw you come out of McNie's office. I thought maybe you'd like to talk."

She stared at him a long moment, and he couldn't tell the thoughts churning behind those too brilliant eyes.

She came to a decision and tossed her head. "That

bastard," she said. "I'll show him." An ugly light grew in her eyes. "Do you want to buy me a drink?"

He said gravely, "It would be my pleasure." Elation swelled within him. He had guessed right about that scene back there. A rejected woman would want to talk. She should know what McNie was doing; she should be able to point out a road to him. Whatever she knew, she would be happy to tell him.

She led him two blocks down the street. He followed her into the Gay Dog saloon. He found a vacant table and ordered a bottle of whisky. Sympathetic attention and whisky. It had loosened many a tongue.

She had a capacity for liquor. She drained glass after glass, and it had no effect other than increasing that hard brilliance in her eyes, the brilliance of unshed tears.

She talked; she talked freely. Most of it was threats, directed at McNie. "I'll fix him," she said savagely. "I'll make him regret this."

Eakin's elation grew. All he needed was a few leading questions to set her off on McNie's other business.

He said, "He seems to be a wealthy man. I wouldn't think that saloon could do that well."

She reached for the bottle. Her face was gloomy. "He's a lucky bastard," she said viciously. "It looks like he has a strike on his hands. I was one of the few, who didn't laugh at him, when he started working that claim. This is his thanks." Her voice filled with self-pity. "I should be sharing in that money he's digging out of the ground."

Eakin said softly, "Maybe he isn't digging the money out of the ground. Maybe he's getting it someplace else."

She stared at him with a puzzled frown. Then she laughed stridently. "You're one of those who said Garney was a damned fool to take in that claim. Well, you're wrong." The frown came back to her face. "Are you trying to say his claim's no good. You keep saying, his other business. What business are you talking about?"

"The business he's in with Gibney." He watched her face closely, hoping to see some flicker of emotion that could give

her away. He knew disappointment. There seemed to be honest confusion in her face.

She shook her head. "He's in no business with Gibney!" "They're together all the time."

She laughed. "I don't know where you got your information, Mister. But you're wrong. Gibney hasn't been in Garney's place for the last two months. I know. I'm there all the time. Or was there," she amended bitterly.

"Then McNie sees Gibney at his office?"

Again, she shook her head. "There's six blocks between the saloon and Wells Fargo. Garney wouldn't walk a block to see his mother." She leaned across the table to peer at Eakin. "What are you after?"

He said wearily, "I don't know." He had been so sure she would give him all the information he needed. He sat, staring blankly at her. She wouldn't be protecting McNie, would she? Not now, he decided. She would gladly use anything she could to hurt Garney McNie. He held stubbornly to his idea that McNie and Gibney were somehow in this together. It fitted too perfectly. But he would never prove it by her. That door was closed.

Her hand fumbled for the bottle. Her laughter had a high, jerky sound. She stared at him, and her eyes were suddenly glassy. She slumped across the table.

Fine, he thought bleakly. The whisky had caught up with her. He shook her shoulder and she mumbled thickly, "Leave me alone." She wasn't completely out. That was something in his favor. He wanted to leave her slumped across the table, but he couldn't do it. He moved to the bartender and asked, "Do you know where she lives?"

The bartender grinned. "The first corner up the street. You'll see stairs on your left. She lives over Hawkin's General Store. I never saw her drink like that before." A thought struck him, and he said, "Hey! What's she doing drinking in here, anyway?"

"I wish I knew," Eakin said. As he moved away, the bartender called after him, "Can you manage her?"

"I'll find out," Eakin said.

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He got her on her feet. She needed the support of his arm to keep from sagging to the floor.

He asked, "Can you walk?"

"Sure, I can walk," she said indignantly. "I want to go home."

"That's where you're going," Eakin said grimly.

He put her arm across his shoulder, and she lolled all over him. His arm around her waist steadied her.

She wobbled, but she could walk. He got her out of the door, his face burning at the derisive remarks that followed them.

She seemed steadier as the night air hit her, and he breathed more freely. He was going to get rid of her just as soon as he pushed her in her door. He owed her that much. No more.

She giggled with every step and passersby turned to stare at them. Eakin's face was stoney. The corner was just ahead. He hoped that bartender had his directions right.

He was a couple of steps from the corner, when somebody turned it and almost bumped into them. The woman recoiled and said, "I beg your pardon. It was my . . ." The words froze in her throat as an accusing look spread across her face.

Eakin had a hollow where his stomach should be. Unity would have to come around that corner at this moment. Words whirled about in his head, and none of them seemed suitable.

He said miserably, "Unity . . ."

Cora threw her arms about his neck. "You're supposed to be taking me home," she said petulantly.

Unity took in Cora's condition. She saw her arms around Eakin's neck. The dress placed Cora's type. Unity's eyes looked like glacial ice.

"Don't let me interrupt anything," she said. She stepped aside to pass them. Her elbow brushed Eakin.

It was awkward, whirling with Cora's arms around his neck. Unity was a half-dozen strides away by the time he made it.



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"Unity," he yelled. "You come back here. It's not what you think. Unity, you listen to me."

He couldn't go after her. If he let go of Cora, she would fall on her face. It tempted him; it tempted him sorely.

He turned Cora back toward the corner, and he wasn't gentle. He said, "Come on."

He walked around the corner and saw the stairs across the street.

Cora pointed to the top of the stairs and giggled. "That's my room. How'd you know?"

At least, he wouldn't be saddled with her much longer. But why couldn't she have lived in the opposite direction? She passed out halfway up the flight of steps. He had to carry her the remainder of the way. He tried the door, and it was unlocked. Things were going his way now that it was too late.

He carried her inside and placed her across the bed. She was beginning to snore.

He stared at her a long moment. He couldn't honestly blame her for what happened. He had tried to use her personal troubles to help him, and it had backfired.

He felt a little surge of pity for her. He unfolded a blanket and covered her. If she really loved McNie, both her heart and head would hurt in the morning.

He closed the door behind him. Now he had to find Unity. She wasn't at her restaurant. He went back to Gaede's office and asked him where Unity lived.

Gaede gave him a quizzical look, and Eakin snapped, "It's none of your business."

Gaede said, "I didn't say a word." He gave Eakin directions to her house.

That trip to Gaede's office was a waste of time. She wasn't home, either. He spent two hours, walking the streets. He didn't see her.

## CHAPTER NINE

EAKIN SAW Gaede for a brief exchange at noon the following day. He told him what happened last night, and his face was morose. "I tried to talk to Unity this morning. She wouldn't even listen to me." His explanation had sounded lame, even to himself. And he couldn't tell her the truth. The truth was going to have to be put off until everything else was cleared up. Maybe that would be too late. He didn't like the thought, but it kept filtering into his head. The contemptuous look in her eyes had been as searing as a hot branding iron. "You don't have to explain to me, Mr. Eakin," she had said. She had turned her back on him, then at his further attempt to make her listen, she had snapped, "Will you leave me alone? I'm busy."

Gaede chuckled at Eakin's look of misery. To the young, a week of misunderstanding was an eternity of torment.

He said, "That ought to teach you to stay away from McNie's." He frowned at Eakin's stubborn expression. "How much does it take to convince you? I know Cora's been living with McNie. If he was into anything, she'd know it."

Eakin shook his head. "Not necessarily." He was beginning to re-evaluate his opinion of Garney McNie. A clever man wouldn't tell a Cora too much. He said, "Ferris, I'll be at McNie's tonight. Come in about nine. I'm going to make a name for myself. I'm going to back you down."

"You are like hell," Gaede said hotly. "I've got to live in this town."

Eaking grinned. "Later, I'll let you gun me in front of everybody here. That'll make up for it." His face sobered.

"Ferris, I can't shake this hunch. I've got to go along with it, until I know for sure."

Gaede studied him. A half-dozen times he had known of those strong feelings in Eakin. And he had never known him to be wrong. Some men had an instinct that way, a sort of sixth sense.

"All right," he growled. "I'll be there at nine. Don't come up with any more fool ideas. Because I'm not going along with them." He turned and walked stiffly away.

Eakin watched him until he was out of sight. Ferris Gaede was a proud man. Backing down, even though it was arranged, would cost him a lot.

By eight-thirty, that evening, Eakin seemed drunk and quarrelsome. Men were beginning to edge away from him at the bar, giving him a cleared space to himself. His size alone commanded respect. And he looked completely competent to handle either his fists, or that well-worn gun at his hip.

He pounded on the bar and yelled for another drink. He was going to have to drag this one out. The whisky was beginning to punch at him. He grinned inwardly. Maybe he had started a little bit too early.

He glowered as the bartender poured his drink. It made the man nervous, and he spilled whisky on the bar.

Eakin said, "Sloppy as a damned hog, aren't you?"

The bartender mopped up the spill and gave Eakin a false, strained smile. He hurried to the other end of the bar. Long experience had given him a nose for impending trouble. The big stranger was seeking an insult. When he found it, that insult would be built into a fight.

McNie's frown increased as he watched Eakin. He beckoned his bouncer over and said, "Phil, ease that one out after he finishes his drink." He was tired of big men getting too drunk and turning ugly. It usually wound up in a fight, and it cost him to replace broken furniture.

Phil was a hulking brute of a man with a slow, stupid face. He had tremendous strength, and he was good at his job. He had thrown half a hundred men out of here,

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and McNie had never seen him work up a good sweat. It was a pleasure watching a man enjoy his work.

Phil nodded and grinned. He padded toward the man at the bar. The past week had been dull. He hoped this man would put up some resistance.

He touched Eakin on the shoulder and said, "Finish your drink, mister. Then go get some air."

McNie set the glass down. He appraised the hulk standing beside him. He saw the eager spark glowing in the man's eyes. He hadn't planned on this. It might work as well as picking a quarrel with Gaede. It might give him all the attention he needed.

He said softly, "And if I don't want to go."

He saw the man blink as he digested the words. He thought he had him figured . . . slow of mind and foot with nothing but power. He saw the movement of the hands, reaching for his left wrist. He was familiar with that trick. A lot of bouncers used it. Once those hands fastened on his wrist, he would be whipped around, and his hand hammer-locked between his shoulder blades. He would be helpless then against the strength of this man. He would go out of here on tiptoe, trying to ease the pain of his tortured arm.

He chopped the edge of his hand against the wrist of one of those hands. He heard the howl of anguish, and the bouncer grabbed the aching wrist with his other hand. He had a right to grab it. The edge of a hand could be as hard and as effective as the edge of a board.

Eakin swung at the wide-open chin. He put the weight of his shoulders behind the blow, and it carried an awesome force. The bouncer's head snapped back, jerking his body with it. His feet tripped over a spittoon, and he went down. He went down limply, and he never stirred after he hit the floor.

"My God," a nearby man said. "Did you see that? One punch."

McNie stared with dispassionate eyes at the unconscious man. He would have said Phil could take a punch better than that. But come to think of it he had never seen that hard

a punch thrown at him. That punch expended all of Phil's usefulness. Every drunk in town would be in here trying the same thing.

A voice roared from the doorway, "What's going on here?"

Every head swiveled toward Ferris Gaede. Gaede looked at the unconscious man, then at Eakin. "You responsible for this?" he growled.

Eakin stared at him. The stare itself was an affront, but the words were a greater challenge. "You going to try to hold me responsible." He was in a crouch, his hand dangling near his gun butt.

He heard the buzz of whispers around him and the scrape of feet as men hurried to get out of the line of fire. Everything about Eakin was a challenge. It was up to Gaede to pick it up, or let it lay.

McNie stepped into the breach of the hanging moment. "No trouble here, Ferris," he said soothingly. "It wasn't his fault at all. He was minding his own business, and Phil got smart with him. I've been having trouble with Phil for the past couple of weeks. He got what he asked for."

Eakin sighed inwardly. Gaede wasn't going to have to back down. Eakin had caught McNie's attention without Gaede losing face before the town.

Gaede glared at McNie. "Garney, you know I won't stand for any trouble. From anybody."

That soothing note remained in McNie's voice. "You won't get any from us, Ferris."

He waited until Gaede left, then said to Eakin, "I want to talk to you." He walked toward his office, hearing Eakin's footsteps behind him.

He sat down and said, "Close the door." He shoved a humidor of cigars across the desk toward Eakin. He asked, "Do you know who that was?"

Eakin bit off the end of a cigar. His indifference said he couldn't care less.

"That was Ferris Gaede. The marshal." McNie waited for the name to put change in Eakin's face. It didn't. He asked, "Do you know how fast he is?"

Eakin didn't shrug, but the impression was there. "I've seen fast men before."

McNie asked abruptly, "Do you want a job?" Here was an able man. He'd like to have him with him.

Eakin laughed sourly. "Do I look that hungry?"

"I'm offering you Phil's job. It pays good money." That was all he could offer at the moment. But he wanted this man. Maybe he could work out something better later on.

"A bouncer's job?" Eakin said, and there was a sneer in his voice. "Is that what you're offering me?"

"It'd only be temporary. Until I figure out something better." He wished he could tell this man more, he wished he could tell him about the possibilities of really big money.

Eakin waited until he saw McNie intended saying no more. He said, "I don't need to work for anybody. I've got this town figured. I can make all the money I want. I've done it before in a tougher place than this."

McNie cursed Gibney mentally for tying his hands. This was the man they needed. He fit every requirement. By his own words, he was on the wrong side of the law. His attitude in facing Gaede was only additional proof. McNie wanted to go against Gibney's orders and hire this man. He didn't quite dare.

Eakin saw the mental struggle. He was quite sure McNie wanted to offer him a different job, but he couldn't. Why? Because he wasn't the head man. It was as simple as that. McNie said, "If you ever need anything, look me up."

Eakin nodded carelessly and turned for the door. He had gathered no solid fact, but he wasn't too disappointed. McNie had something on his tongue. But he needed a little more certainty before he could say it.

He stopped at the door and pointed a finger at McNie. "I'll stand this town on its ear. You'll hear about me."

He shut the door behind him and crossed the main room. He had something in mind, something that would further capture McNie's interest. He was going to have trouble convincing Gaede it was the right move.

He walked the streets for a half hour before he was sure

he wasn't followed. He ducked into the alley behind Gaede's office and waited a good five minutes. No one turned into it. He moved down the alley, tried the door, and it was unlocked. He opened it and stepped inside. Gaede had a reason for leaving that door unlocked.

Gaede looked up from his desk and grunted, "I've been expecting you." He breathed a long sigh. "It didn't work, did it?"

Eakin grinned. "McNie offered me a job."

Gaede's interest sharpened. "Doing what?"

"Taking Phil's place. I turned it down."

Gaede said gloomily, "At least, I didn't have to tuck my tail between my legs." Eakin's idiotic grin irked him and he asked testily, "What did you accomplish?"

"McNie had something else on his mind, but something kept him from saying it. He wanted to offer me more than just that job. He's more than just a saloon keeper, Ferris."

Gaede snorted. "More of your hunches?"

"Maybe," Eakin said stubbornly. "But I made a brag to him. I'm going to carry it out. I'm going to rob a stage." He said it as calmly as if he were talking about the weather.

Gaede's eyes bulged, and he had trouble in getting the words out. "You what?" he exploded.

"I'm going to cut in on them. I'm going to rob a stage."

"My God," Gaede said incredulously. "You've gone clean out of your head."

Eakin's face was sober. "Probably." It was a desperate move, born because he was up against an impasse. He had to convince somebody he was on the wrong side of the law. If he convinced them enough, he might get an offer to join them. He could also irk them enough to get a bullet in the head.

"No," Gaede kept saying. "I won't hear of it. If a law-abiding citizen doesn't cut you down, one of the road agents will."

Either was possible. Eakin admitted. But from what Gaede had told him, he didn't think he had to worry too much about any law-abiding citizen, including the guard

riding shotgun. Gaede had said there hadn't been any resistance from passengers or guards for weeks. They had been too thoroughly conditioned by fear. The road agents were entirely different. They could go one of two ways. Shoot him, or take him in.

He said, "It might not lead to the man who killed Pete. But it could wipe out the stage holdups. That would be something, wouldn't it?"

Gaede breathed a weary sigh. "I don't know, Dan. I've been going around in circles for so long I can't think any more." His eyes bored into Eakin. "You realize you'll be putting yourself beyond any help?"

The question said that Gaede was giving in to Eakin's idea. Eakin nodded. "I realize that, Ferris." The whole plan was a reckless gamble, parented by desperation and impatience. He couldn't see anything else to do, and he wanted this thing cleared up. He had a new reason for his impatience. Unity. He could make her listen to him, when he could tell her the real reason for his being here. He didn't want to think of all the contingencies that could happen. He could meet resistance, either from the passengers, or the man riding shotgun. What would he do then? Run, he thought bleakly. Just as fast as he could go and hope none of them were too good a shot.

Gaede muttered, "I don't like it. I don't like it a damned bit. But I know Wells Fargo is having trouble getting guards to ride the stages. They just hired Tom Hays a couple of days ago. He wouldn't put up a fight against anyone. But somebody on that stage could have enough guts to cut loose at you. And somebody up in the hills could be watching you all the time."

"I've thought of all that," Eakin said softly.

Gaede searched Eakin's face, and that weary sigh sounded again. "When are you planning on doing it?"

"Tomorrow morning. I'll jump the first stage that comes along. I'll dump the strong box down an abandoned shaft and tell you later where you can pick it up."



Gaede kept shaking his head. He was still fighting against accepting Eakin's words.

Eakin said, "When the holdup's reported, put out a wanted poster on me."

"You're just begging to be shot."

Eakin grinned. "I'm begging for notice. I won't see you again, Ferris, until I know something."

"If you ever see me," Gaede said gloomily. He walked with Eakin to the rear door. He let his hand rest on Eakin's shoulder for a long moment. The obvious was in his mind, but he didn't say it. Eakin had enough sense to take every precaution.

Eakin opened the door a crack and listened. The alley was still and dark. He slipped out of the door and heard it close softly behind him. He moved a half-dozen steps and crouched. His eyes probed into the darkness. He felt strangely alone. Already he felt like a criminal, with every eye searching for him, with every hand lifted against him.

## CHAPTER TEN

HE AWAKENED early in the morning, and his stomach was a hard knot. He wasn't interested in food, but he did want coffee. He found a restaurant that was open, and he drank three cups. He thought of Unity as he drank them. She would hear more bad news about him, and it would strengthen her earlier impression. When this was all over, it was going to be hard to make her listen to him. She'll listen, he thought. I'll hold her until she does.

He walked to the livery stable, and the old bandit came out yawning. He said, "This damned business. People won't let a man get his sleep. You're out early enough."

The sun was just coming up over the mountains. As yet it didn't have enough strength to warm the chill morning air.

Eakin said, "I want my horse." There was a tenseness in him. It showed in his voice.

"You must have pretty rushing business," the old man grumbled, "to be riding off this early."

Eakin wanted to snap at him to hurry it up and he held it.

It seemed it took the old man forever to get Stepper ready. Eakin wanted to snatch the reins from his hand and he forced himself to remain casual.

The old man squinted at him. "You coming back soon?"

"I don't know," Eakin said. That was the truth. He grinned bleakly at the thought.

"Man was here last night asking about you," the old man said.

"Who was he?"

The old man shook his head. "I don't know him. He was

a noseey one. Wanted to know what you did and where you came from. Admired your horse, too. Said that kind of a horse could carry a man fast and far."

Eakin started to ask if the man was McNie, then held the question. The old man would know McNie. But who else would be interested in him? Gibney, McNie, Gaede and Unity were the only people here interested enough to be asking questions about him. He could rule out Gaede and Unity. That left Gibney and McNie. Probably McNie sent someone, he thought. His heart beat picked up tempo. It just could be that his brag to McNie had made him interested enough to want to check up on him.

He grunted in response, took the reins, and swung up into the saddle.

"Keep out of trouble," the old man called after him.

Eakin grinned sourly. He wished someone could give him a guarantee of that.

He rode several miles out of town before he found the spot he wanted. The road came down a hill, then immediately climbed a long slope, and a stage would have to labor up it. Halfway up the slope was a huge jumble of rocks, near the roadside. A man and horse could be well-hidden in them. He rode into the rocks and dismounted, letting Stepper pick at the sparse blades of grass. He had the uneasy feeling he was being watched. The feeling had been with him ever since he left town. He scanned the country in all directions, and it was still and desolate. That uneasy feeling could spring from what he was about to do.

The sun strengthened, bearing down through his light jacket. He swore softly as he tried to find a more comfortable position on the flinty ground. He should have gotten a time schedule from the depot. Then he could have avoided this long wait.

He rolled a cigarette and was lighting it, when he heard a faint, distant crack. He jerked the match from the cigarette's tip, and his face was tight. That could have been a rifle shot. He heard the sound again, and some of the tightness eased from his face. The sound was too thin to be a rifle shot. The

cracking of a long whip could make a sound like that. He stood and peered cautiously over a boulder. He couldn't see the stage. He heard the whip again and waited for the vehicle to appear. He saw the dust cloud first at the crest of the hill, the tail wind pushing it beyond the coach. Then the stage showed at the skyline. It seemed to hang there momentarily, and Eakin heard several cracks of the whip.

The stage picked up momentum on the long, downward slope. The driver kept up his whipping, wanting all the speed he could get for the following hill. The stage grew in size, and it was careening from side to side. The horses were in full gallop to keep from being overrun, and they caught the dust cloud and passed it.

Eakin stepped to his horse and mounted. His throat was tight, and his heart beat at an inordinate rate. The stage was almost to the little valley between the two slopes. It was at its maximum speed as it rolled through the valley.

Eakin waited tensely halfway up the following slope. That speed couldn't last long. The heavy drag of the stage's weight and the tilt of the road would drain the speed away. By the time the vehicle reached Eakin, the teams would be moving at a laborious walk.

The driver's arm flogged steadily, trying to hold his speed as long as possible, but fifty yards below Eakin, the teams could do little better than a walk.

He waited until the stage was twenty-five yards away. He drew his gun, and the tenseness was a physical hurt. He lifted the reins and bounded out onto the road. He wasn't aware of the wild cry that tore from his throat.

"Hold it," he yelled, and the gun was centered on the guard. Stepper danced in little circles. Eakin had to snub him tight to keep his gun leveled on the stage.

The guard's arms went immediately into the air. His face was a pale, blank mask. The driver swore, and his hands loosened on the reins. The teams drifted for the shoulder of the road as the reins went momentarily slack. The driver hauled on them, and the long strands of the master reins coiled into the boot. He dragged the teams back on their

haunches. While the stage's momentum wasn't great, the hasty stopping set it down with a jolt.

The messenger's eyes had never left the gun in Eakin's hand. He wasn't braced for the stop. He squawked as he was pitched forward on the rumps of the wheelers. His hands worked frantically as he pushed himself off the horses and slid to the ground on Eakin's side of the road.

Eakin's lips twitched in a faint grin. He couldn't remember a more frightened man than this guard. Gaede was right, when he said Wells Fargo was down to hiring a poor caliber of man.

The guard's hands were high in the air. "Don't shoot," he kept repeating.

The driver threw him a disgusted glance. The teams wanted to move, and they were plunging in the traces. The driver had his hands full in controlling them. He turned his head toward the guard and spit an amber stream at the man. He had hoped to splatter him, but the range was too great.

"Throw down the box," Eakin yelled at the driver.

The driver was a leathery-faced man with white hairs showing in his mustache. Similar experiences were behind him, and that weathered face showed he was resigned to them.

"Mister," he said calmly. "If I let go these reins, the teams will plunge right off the road."

It could be true. The horses were still fighting the restraint of the reins. Beyond the shoulder of the road was a shallow ditch but deep enough to overturn a stage, if it was dragged across it.

A passenger stuck his head out of the window, and Eakin jerked the gun in the man's direction and fired a shot over the coach's roof. It was funny how fast the head disappeared.

Eakin motioned with the gun muzzle at the trembling guard. "Climb up and get it," he ordered.

The guard's haste showed how anxious he was to please Eakin. He stepped up onto the hub, then onto the rim of the wheel. His hands fumbled at the box.

"Hurry up," Eakin snapped.

## GUN RICH

The guard turned a frantic face toward him. "I am. It's heavy."

He hauled the box out of the boot, each tug sliding it an inch or two. He gave an extra jerk, and it slid free and toppled to the road. It struck with a heavy, sodden sound, and one corner sank into the dirt.

"Get going," Eakin ordered the driver.

The driver said contemptuously, "I'd like to leave him with you. I knew it was a damned waste of money to hire him."

"No," the guard squalled.

Eakin grinned. "What would I do with him?"

The driver shook his grizzled head. "One holdup man and one guard. I wonder what kind of odds he wants." He snapped the reins at the backs of the teams and yelled, "Hi-yah."

The guard scrambled hastily from the wheel as it began to turn and hauled himself up beside the driver. He stared straight ahead. Eakin didn't envy him the remainder of his trip. That tough, old coot, driving, would tear off the guard's ears with his biting comments.

The teams dug in their hoofs, slashing dirt and pebbles behind them. The wheels turned faster. The driver went to the whip, and the stage's momentum increased. Eakin sat there until the stage climbed to the top of the hill, then dropped out of sight. He put the gun away, and the tendency of his hands to tremble surprised him. He gave a gusty sigh. It had gone as well as he could have hoped for. He had met no resistance. No one was hurt.

He stared at the strong box. From its heavy fall, it looked as if it contained at least a bar of bullion. His breathing quickened as he wondered how much was in it.

He swore at himself and said, "You got a crook's mind." The thought of easy wealth had gripped him for a moment. He assured himself he hadn't entertained it very long, nor very seriously. But nevertheless, it had been in his head. He shook his head as he stared soberly at the box. Now he could understand a little better what pulled men down the wrong road. That first attempt probably came hard to every

man, but once it was made, the pull of easy wealth took over. He couldn't deny that a moment's temptation had flooded him; he could deny that it had lasted only the briefest of time.

He grinned and said, "Stepper, I just discovered something. I got the makings of a crook in me."

He swung out of the saddle and led the horse beside the box. He dropped the reins, bent over, and grasped the handles. He grunted at its weight as he lifted it. Stepper protested that strange object being placed on his back, and he danced away with little, mincing steps. Eakin yelled at him, and the horse stood still. But his ears flattened and raised, and his eyes rolled.

Eakin balanced the box across the saddle with one hand and held the reins with the other. He guided Stepper across country toward the patches of shadow behind the road.

He passed up the first shaft, because he couldn't see its bottom. It would be a hell of a job, raising the box from such a depth. The second hole was little more than a pit, and Eakin passed that by, too. A chance passerby could spot the box. He judged the third shaft to be about twenty-five feet deep. Not too deep for a man to be lowered to the bottom on a rope.

He hoisted the box from the saddle to his shoulder. He would hate to carry that damned weight very far. He took a half-dozen steps and stood at the rim of the hole. He bent forward and let the box slide off his shoulder. He heard the heavy, sodden sound as it landed. He peered over the edge, and he could see the shadowy outlines of the box. It looked as if it had buried itself halfway in the ground.

He straightened and scanned the country. That uneasy feeling of being watched was back. It was stronger this time, much stronger.

He said, "Stepper, that's done. Now I guess all we can do is wait."

He hadn't reached Stepper, when the two riders materialized. The suddenness of their appearance left a man shakey. One moment, he was alone, and the next, they were here. He

guessed they had moved behind that fold in the ground. It would hide them until they were only a few yards from him.

He snarled and fell into a crouch. His hand made a move toward the holstered gun. He had no intention of touching that gun butt. He was well aware of the two rifles, covering him.

"Go ahead," the big man, on the left, said, "I'd enjoy blowing a hole through you." The rifle muzzle jerked at Eakin, and his hand stopped. The man rode a big roan, and he was sloppy in dress and personal habits. He hadn't shaved in a month, and it looked equally as long since he had washed. His shirt was torn and dirty, and one of his boots was broken. The horse and its trappings shone. Evidently, the man put all of his grooming on his horse.

The slim man was seated on a claybank. The roan was the flashier of the two horses, but Eakin would have picked the claybank. It was knot-headed and mean-eyed, but it looked as if it had more bottom. Just as the horses were an oddly assorted pair, so were the riders. The slim man was meticulously dressed, and he wore a glove on his left hand. He had a lean-cut face and a thin mouth. His eyes were the palest blue Eakin had ever seen. A dangerous man, Eakin thought. One given more to action than to words. Cruelty was stamped in those frozen eyes.

The slim man said, "You'd better keep a light trigger finger, Hamp. He's got some answers we need."

Hamp said explosively, "Then by God, tell him to get his hands up." He glowered at the slim man. "Who in the hell do you think you are, Lige? To be giving me orders."

Eakin saw the tightening in Lige's mouth. These two were thrown together, but not by choice. His hands rose in the air. He had no intentions of provoking either of them.

He said, "What's this all about? If you two are planning on robbing me, you won't get much." His chuckle had a strained sound.

Lige allowed himself a small movement of his lips. If it was meant to be a smile, it had no warming quality. He said



softly. "Friend, it looked like you were doing a little robbing, yourself."

So the impression of being watched had basis. Eakin would guess they had followed him from town. That was what he wanted, wasn't it? Still, he had the odd feeling of cold, sharp teeth nibbling at him.

He said, "I don't know what you're talking about." The words had a weak note, and it wasn't all feigned.

Hamp said grudgingly, "I'll say one thing. You got guts going it alone. Why, we'd use . . ."

"Hamp," Lige said sharply.

Hamp shut up and glanced at Lige.

"You've got a fat mouth," Lige said.

Hamp's eyes turned mean. "One of these days . . ." The words faltered and broke off as Lige stared at him. Hamp would bluster and threaten, but he would be careful not to push too hard against Lige.

Lige dismounted and moved toward Eakin. He stopped three feet from him, and that rifle barrel looked close enough to poke into Eakin's belly.

"Unbuckle that gun belt," Lige ordered. "I think you're smart enough that you don't need a warning to be careful."

Eakin was. His hands moved slowly as he unbuckled the belt. It dropped to the ground, and Lige said, "Kick it over here."

He bent, picked up the belt, and handed it to Hamp. Hamp hung it over his saddle horn.

Lige said, "Now we'll get that box out of the hole."

Eakin said, "Box? I don't know . . ."

Lige moved surprisingly fast. A long step carried him to Eakin, and he slashed him across the face with the back of the gloved hand. Eakin felt the quick stinging in his lips and tasted blood. He stared at Lige, keeping his hand from the hurt.

Lige asked, "Do you want to play some more?"

Eakin shook his head.

"Then move," Lige commanded. The rifle barrel indicated the direction.

Eakin moved to the edge of the hole and stopped. Lige and Hamp were behind him. He felt a quick stab of fear, and the area between his shoulder blades hurt with its tenseness. If they shot him, he would fall into that hole, and nobody would ever know.

He asked huskily, "What do I do now?"

"Go down and get it," Lige said.

Eakin was afraid Lige would hear his sigh of relief. At least for the moment, Lige wasn't going to shoot him.

He turned his head. "No," he yelped. "That's mine. I took all the risks. I . . ." His words broke off at the look on Lige's face.

"It was yours," Lige said. "We don't need you to get it out."

Eakin's shoulders slumped in an admission of defeat.

"Lower him into the hole," Lige told Hamp.

Hamp shook out his rope, and Eakin tied a loop in its end. He placed his boot in the loop and grasped the rope with both hands. He scraped off some skin, going over the edge. Pebbles and dirt showered him as he disappeared into the hole. It was a jerky descent as Hamp's horse advanced toward the shaft. Eakin hoped Hamp had taken a secure dally around the horn.

He stepped out of the loop at the bottom and looked up. Lige was peering at him over the edge.

"What do I do now?" he asked.

Lige swore at him. "Tie the box on," he ordered.

Eakin wrapped the rope end four ways around the box before he tied it. He made the knot as tight as possible. He didn't want that box falling on its way up. The hole was narrow, and there wouldn't be any place to go, if the box fell.

He watched the box rise, and he was scared. They could leave him down here. They could ride off, and nobody would ever find him. He ducked as the box went over the edge, loosening a cascade of pebbles and dirt.

It seemed it took them forever to untie the box. He looked up, and the rim of the hole was empty. "Hey," he shouted. Then in a louder voice, "Hey."

## GUN RICH

Lige looked over the edge. His face was amused. "You getting worried?" he asked. He threw the end of the rope down at Eakin.

Eakin retied the loop for his boot. He stepped into it. If Hamp didn't take it easy, Eakin was going to be thoroughly scraped.

He tried to fend off the walls of the hole as he rose, and they kept banging into him. Hamp dragged him over the edge, and Eakin felt the rocks tear at him.

He expected the rope to slacken, but Hamp kept his horse moving. Eakin swore at him and tried to haul himself up the rope to get enough slack to get to his feet. The horse moved just fast enough that he couldn't quite get the slack he needed.

"Goddamn you," he yelled savagely. He felt his clothes tear, then the stinging in a dozen places on his skin as his clothing wore through.

Hamp stopped after fifty feet, and Eakin scrambled to his feet. He cursed Hamp with every oath at his command, and Hamp's eyes turned ugly.

"I can drag you some more," he said.

Lige said, "That's enough," but he was grinning.

Eakin wanted to yell, I'll get both of you for this. He held the words. It was a futile threat at the moment. His pants were shredded from waist to knee, and his shirt had a long tear in it. Dirt was ground into his clothes and skin.

Lige said, "Climb on your horse."

Eakin said, "You got the box. What more do you want?" He didn't push the protest. He moved toward Stepper before he finished speaking.

Hamp's eyes glistened as he watched Eakin mount. "Now there's a horse I'd like to own."

Lige said, "After me, you'll own it."

Hamp said in a surly tone, "That could be arranged."

Lige grinned at him, a wolfish grin, a mere baring of his teeth.

Lige picked up the strongbox and balanced it across his saddle. He mounted and said, "Move out. To the northwest."

Eakin asked, "Where are we going?"

Lige's temper exploded. "Shut up," he snapped. "Just do as you're told."

The silent ride seemed longer than it actually was. Eakin wished he knew the country better. They had left the road some miles ago, and there were no familiar landmarks by which to place himself.

The sun was hot in his face, when he saw buildings ahead of him. Behind the house was a large shed, joined to a corral. A smaller shed was a hundred yards from the corral. As they drew nearer he saw the black opening of a mine tunnel. He didn't know what the square building to the tunnel's left housed, but a grinding, crashing reverberation came from it, increasing in intensity as they approached it. He had heard stamp mills around Virginia City, and one was operating in that square building. A stamp mill was an expensive piece of machinery. Evidently, this was a profitable mine.

Lige stopped him in front of the small shed. He said, "Get off."

Eakin swung out of the saddle. At a motion from Lige, he stepped into the building. The door closed behind him, and he heard the click of a lock. He heard the scuff of retreating boots, and he tried the door. He exerted more strength, then lunged against it. It was a stout door and well hung. His efforts got him a bruised shoulder.

He paused for breath and looked around his surroundings. It was a small building, not over six by eight feet, evidently once used as a tool shed. There was no window in it, and the only light came through the cracks in the board. He made a circuit of the walls, trying each board, hoping to find a loose one. He grunted as he finished his inspection. He'd need a sledge hammer to break out of this building. There was nothing to sit on but the dirt floor, and he picked a corner and sat down in it. It had been a long time since breakfast, and his stomach rumbled. Breakfast, hell. No one could call three cups of coffee breakfast. He hoped they were going to feed him.

An hour later, he heard the rattle of the lock, and he came

to his feet. He debated the possibility of rushing whoever opened the door.

The door opened, and Hamp's big bulk was outlined by the last light of the day. Eakin dropped the idea of rushing him. Two men were behind Hamp, each holding a leveled gun.

Hamp carried a plate in one hand and a cup in the other. He shoved them at Eakin.

Eakin took them and asked, "Where am I? Why are you holding me?"

"Aren't you satisfied to just be alive?" Hamp growled. He slammed the door, and Eakin heard the click of the lock again.

He sat down in his corner again and ate the plate of half-warmed beans. The coffee was thick enough to plow. Ordinarily, he would have called the food bad. It wasn't now. He wished he had another plate.

It grew as black as the bottom of an ink well. He rolled and lit a cigarette, needing both the comfort of the smoke and the cheery winking red eye. The chill night air of the mountains began to creep into the building. He wondered if they were going to keep him out here all night without a blanket. He yelled several times and received no answer. Apparently, they were. He settled down to making himself as comfortable as possible.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

HE WAS ASLEEP, when the door opened. A toe prodded him into wakefulness, and he sat up and stared blinking into the light of a pineknot torch. He could see the hand and the arm of the man holding it. The rest of him was a shadowy silhouette.

"Get up," Lige said. "And move damned careful. I'm not alone."

Eakin saw the figures of two other men, waiting outside the door.

Lige stepped aside, and Eakin walked through the door.

"To the house," Lige said and shoved Eakin's shoulder, turning him in the direction of it.

Eakin moved toward the yellow glow of a lighted window. The house was a small clapboarded structure, sitting in the lee of a hill. He felt the tenseness begin to lay hold of his muscles again. The answer to his long wait was in that house.

Three men lounged before the house, and he felt their sharp scrutiny as he waited for Lige to open the the door. The odds were getting rough. That made six men he knew of around there.

Lige opened the door, and Eakin stepped inside, blinking against the light of the lamp after the darkness outside. A fat man sat at a table, his back toward Eakin.

That broad back and fat neck wasn't hard to identify. Eakin said, "You."

McNie's chair groaned as he turned. He took Eakin's tone to be surprise, and he chuckled. "You figured me for just a fat, dumb saloon keeper, didn't you?" He had a self-pleased

look on his face. "I listened to you talk last night, and I figured every move you were going to make. It checked out just like I figured."

Eakin felt a chill of apprehension. Had he been followed to Gaede's office?

McNie's next words drove the apprehension away. "Yes sir," he said and chuckled again. "Lige and Hamp picked you up, when you came out of your hotel this morning. They watched everything you did." He moved his chair farther, and Eakin saw the bar of bullion that McNie's body had hidden. It set in the middle of the table, and the lamplight gleamed dully on it.

McNie pointed at it. "That came out of your strong box."

Eakin's face darkened. "Goddamnit. That's mine. I did the . . ." He closed his mouth abruptly.

McNie and Lige exchanged glances, and there was some kind of a mutual agreement in the exchange.

"It was yours," McNie corrected. "What did you think you were going to do with it?"

"I'd have figured out something," Eakin said sullenly.

McNie laughed. "You'd have packed it around until you were sick of its weight. Why did you dump it down that old mine shaft?"

The sullenness in Eakin's face increased. "I figured the law would be out looking around. That box would've slowed me down. I was coming back to get it after things quieted down."

McNie nodded as if he were pleased. "You figured some things pretty well. But you left a lot of loose strings." He unfolded a piece of paper and handed it to Eakin. "Such as this."

Eakin stared at the recognizable likeness of himself. A five hundred dollar tag was on his head.

McNie chuckled at the stupefied look on Eakin's face. "Gaede moves pretty fast. He got these out this afternoon. How? From the passenger's descriptions." His look was pitying. "You didn't think you could hold up a stage unmasked and not have someone describe you, did you? With that

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reward on your head, you never would have gotten a chance to come back after your bar."

"You going to turn me over to the marshal?"

McNie grinned. He had full control of the situation, and he enjoyed it. He looked at Lige and chuckled. "He does a few smart things and a lot of fool things. Think we can make anything out of him?"

Lige shrugged.

McNie's face hardened. "You throw in with me, or I'll turn you loose to let someone pick you up for Gaede."

Eakin's jaw sagged as he struggled with a new thought. "You mean you're in this, too?"

McNie laughed with delight. "On a bigger scale than you could ever dream of."

Eakin shook his head. "I don't know. I've always worked by myself."

"I've pointed out your crudeness. We've got a smooth organization. We'll take your bar of silver and resmelt it. Then we can market it as silver we've dug out of my mine."

Eakin's face was carefully blank. It was just as he had figured it. He had one problem left, but that was a big one. How was he going to get this information to Gaede?

"Do I get my silver back?" he asked.

"You do not. It goes in the pot, to be shared by everyone." At the angry look on Eakin's face, McNie said impatiently, "You're lucky and don't know it. Your share can come to ten times more than this single bar." He slapped it with his hand. "Or I'll take you back and turn you loose in Virginia City. What's it going to be?"

Eakin's eyes had a harried look. "I guess I got no choice."

McNie nodded. "I thought you'd see it that way." He looked at Lige, and there was a question in his eyes.

Lige said grudgingly, "He looks all right. But maybe you should check with . . ."

McNie snapped, "This is my place, and I'll do some of the deciding."

Lige smiled faintly. "All right, Garney. If this next one goes



through, like we heard it was, maybe it will be the last one. It would be, if we cut the shares down."

McNie said steadily, "It might work out that way, Lige."

Eakin missed none of the implications in their conversation. So there was somebody else in this, a man higher than McNie. Apparently, this was the first decision McNie had made on his own. Something big was in the making. Before it happened, he hoped he could get to Gaede with what he knew.

Lige said, "You can't count on Hamp."

McNie's face had a look of distaste. "I never planned to. I only sent him along with you in case you ran into trouble."

Lige's eyes had a reddish glow. "We might just pull it off, Garney. We can, if this one's any good."

"He'll fit, Lige."

Eakin growled, "What do I do now?"

"Sit down and make yourself comfortable," McNie said.

Eakin sat down at the table. "At least, it's better than that toolshed. I was getting cold out there."

McNie chuckled. "You don't know how much better. You're coming in at the right time. You stick with Lige and me, and you'll be in on the biggest thing in your life." He could count on Lige, but he needed another good man. It would leave Gibney quantity but not quality.

Eakin said, "I'm listening."

McNie took a deep breath. "There's a hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of bullion in that tunnel." Split three ways it would leave each man a worthwhile sum. Or maybe it would be split only two ways. After Eakin had helped them, it would be simple to discard him. That was something he would have to work out with Lige. Gibney thought they could go on forever, but McNie knew better. One unlucky break, one careless slip, and the whole thing could blow up in their faces. It was time to get out.

Eakin's face was awe-stricken. "That's a hell of a lot of money."

Lige said harshly, "Make up your mind. Are you with us?"

Eakin grinned. "What other choice do I have?" He looked at McNie. "You tell me what you want done."

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"We do nothing until morning. Then we find out for sure when the shipment's coming through."

Eakin asked, "When do I get my gun and horse back?"

Lige grinned sourly. "Why I'd say in the morning. You've got no worry. We'll take good care of you."

McNie nodded his agreement.

Eakin said carelessly, "It suits me. Now where do I sleep?"

McNie pointed to a room off the parlor. "You'll find a cot in there."

Eakin walked into the room and lay down. He heard the low hum of their talk. He didn't try to make out the words. He lay awake a long time that night. They would keep an eye on him tonight. It would be dangerous, if not impossible, trying to slip away. He wished he could take what he had to Gaede. It would blow this operation sky-high. But there was another man in on it, the man, who was bringing McNie information in the morning. Eakin wanted that man, too. Gibney, he thought, before he fell asleep. It has to be Gibney.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

EAKIN WAS in the kitchen, in the morning, when he saw the rider approaching. Even at this distance there was something familiar about the man. He wouldn't have long to wait to identify him, for the horseman was moving fast.

He said a soft, "Ah," as Gibney threw off in front of the porch. Lige and McNie were in the front room. Eakin glanced out the kitchen window. Two men were in plain view. He would never be able to cross to the barn and get Stepper out without arousing suspicion. He wished he could reach Gaede. He had enough to smash this until not a shred of it remained.

He moved to the kitchen door and pressed an ear against it. He hoped they would talk loud enough for him to overhear them.

Gibney came into the parlor, and he was in a sweat of impatience. "I couldn't find out until just a while ago. It's coming through this afternoon."

"The big one?" McNie asked.

Gibney said triumphantly, "Big enough to run two stages together. But they've doubled the guard. Goddamnit. We would be caught short-handed."

"Not as short-handed as you think," McNie said. His voice lowered as he told about yesterday's stage holdup. "He did it on his own. I knew he was a good man, when I first saw him." He pulled a folded poster from his pocket. "Gaede wants him."

Gibney's face blackened as he looked at the poster. He said in a strangled voice, "You took him on, without consulting me."

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"I did," McNie snapped. "You said yourself we were short-handed."

"Where is he?" Gibney asked in an ominously calm voice.

McNie missed the menace in it. "He's here." He lifted his voice and called, "Eakin."

Eakin came out of the kitchen, a false, bright grin on his face. He wished McNie had trusted him all the way. He wished he had his gun.

"You," Gibney said, the blood congesting in his face.

"Me," Eakin admitted. "There's no reason for anything to be between us. She told me she never wanted to see me again."

It only made Gibney's anger worse. He pulled his gun, and Eakin noted he was surprisingly fast.

Eakin threw up a hand and said, "Wait." That insane fury could move Gibney's trigger finger at any tick of time.

McNie said, "Horace, we need him. What's between you personally doesn't matter now."

Gibney cursed him until he ran out of breath. He saw Lige's expression darken, and the muzzle of the gun moved to cover him. He said warningly, "Lige, watch yourself. McNie's a damned fool. He doesn't know anything about this man."

"But the poster . . ." McNie protested.

Gibney said, "I saw Gaede going into the printing shop this morning. That was before the news of the holdup got back to town. I'm thinking Gaede was ordering these posters then. He planted this man with us."

Eakin cursed the happenstance of Gibney seeing Gaede going into the print shop. Gibney was suspicious and fast with his thinking.

McNie was unconvinced. "No," he said stubbornly. "He wouldn't have taken all those risks of holding up the stage alone. I say he's all right. You're just so damned jealous . . ."

It was the wrong thing to say, for Gibney's cheeks went taut and pale. He stared at McNie, and his eyes had a wicked spark. "You've been pushing pretty hard lately, haven't you, Garney?" he said. "Maybe too hard."

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He raised his voice and yelled, "Hamp. Come in here. Bring the rest of them with you."

Eakin's nerves were strung like telegraph wires. Was Gibney pushing this to a showdown? If so, Eakin was caught squarely in the middle.

Hamp and three men filed into the room. They stood behind Gibney, their eyes going from face to face. They sensed big trouble in the room, and it made them uneasy.

"Boys," Gibney said. "McNie hired a new man without asking me. McNie says he's all right, but he doesn't know for sure."

It was the first time their opinion had been asked on anything, and it left them at a loss. Hamp was the first to speak. "I don't like no new man coming in for part of my share."

Gibney grinned bleakly. "That's not the big worry. The big worry is, will there be anything to share. There won't be, if Gaede planted him here. And he's smart enough to do it."

Hamp glared at Eakin. "Then I say shoot him now and take no chances." Three heads, behind him, nodded in agreement.

Eakin's stomach felt hollow. How far would McNie go for him? Particularly, when the weight of numbers was aligned against him.

McNie said, "No. I know why Gibney's against him. He knows, too. I brought him here, and I take full responsibility."

"And you think that's enough," Gibney sneered.

"It's enough right now," McNie said stubbornly. "I'm willing we check into him further. We can leave him here until we know for sure. We got work to do, and we stand here arguing."

Heads nodded again. That sounded reasonable to them.

Eakin felt cold sweat on his forehead. He had a short reprieve. He didn't miss the gleam in Gibney's eyes. Gibney had a personal hatred driving him. He would check thoroughly, and Eakin couldn't stand much of that. Actually, Gibney could hold him here, and Ferris Gaede would go

crazy looking for him. That would be all the tip-off Gibney needed.

Eakin said sullenly, "I was forced here. I didn't want to come."

"That's true," McNie said. He looked at Lige for support.

Lige's face looked a little doubtful. "It wouldn't hurt to be sure," Lige muttered.

Gibney's laugh was more like a short bark. The show of opposition against him had been weak. He was in control again. He said, "Then we leave him here. Hamp, you stay and watch him."

He spoke to Hamp, but he stared at McNie. Maybe Garney McNie had outlived his usefulness.

"Not without him being tied up," Hamp protested. "If he's as slick as you say he is, I'm not going to responsible for him."

Gibney's eyes gleamed. "Hamp, I think you've got an idea." His eyes challenged McNie, and McNie made no dissent.

Eakin's heart sank. McNie wasn't powerful enough to threaten Gibney seriously.

Gibney and Hamp tied Eakin, and they did a thorough job. His hands were laced with cruel tightness behind his back, and he could feel the pressure of the rope about his ankles through his boots. The tightness of the ropes would cut off circulation before too much time passed. McNie saved him from having hands and feet tied together.

McNie said savagely, "He's going to be uncomfortable enough as it is. With him tied up like he is and a man watching him, you're still afraid of him?"

Pale color washed Gibney's face. He stared hard at McNie, but he didn't press the additional roping. "Keep an eye on him, Hamp."

Hamp nodded. "He'll be right here when you get back."

Gibney said, "We haven't much time. Let's get moving." His eyes were mocking as he looked at McNie. "You, too, Garney. I told you we'd be up against double guards."

Eakin saw the shock on McNie's face. Evidently, he hadn't been in on an actual holdup before.

Gibney's eyes bored into him, and McNie swallowed hard and moved through the door.

Eakin listened to the receding thud of hoofs. Behind his back, his hands forced at his bonds. They didn't give.

Hamp pulled a knife from its sheath in his boot top and began whittling long, thin splinters from the table.

"You got in with the wrong man," he said. "You should've played up to Gibney. He's the brains. He knows McNie and Lige have been trying to undercut him. They'll be damned sorry." His hand moved, and he flicked the knife at Eakin. Its point embedded in the wall not six inches from Eakin's head. He laughed as Eakin flinched. "I could've put that point between your eyes. You remember that."

He got up and jerked the knife from the wall. He went back to his whittling.

Eakin said, "I didn't ask to come here. You know that."

Hamp shrugged. "Me? I don't know anything. I just take orders. Gibney's sore at you. Don't expect me to step in between. I don't want him turning on me."

"How long will they be gone?"

Hamp grinned. "Two, three hours. Quit worrying. You aren't going anyplace."

Eakin thought he could figure on two hours at a minimum. Time could drag, or race. He knew this two hours would race.

He said, "Hamp, let me go. I promise to clear out of the country. I promise . . ." His words faded at the expression on Hamp's face.

Hamp enjoyed Eakin's pleading. "Do you know what would happen to me, if I did?" He placed the back of the knife against his throat and drew it across it. "I got a hunch the same thing is going to happen to you. I never knew Gibney to take a chance."

"I'll go on foot. I'll give you my horse."

"Why, you poor damned fool. I'm already planning on taking your horse."

Eakin said, "I don't feel so good."

Hamp's tone was malicious. "I don't blame you. Nobody

feels so good when he crosses Gibney. You haven't a chance with him, no matter what you are. He'll never forget that beating you gave him. I've heard him rave about it."

Hamp laughed. "To look at him no one would think Gibney is as mean as he is. I've been with him since the first holdup. He shot a driver for only one reason. To put a fear in all Wells Fargo drivers and guards. It's worked, too."

Eakin's face remained blank, but his mind raced feverishly. He had everything Gaede wanted to know, and he couldn't do a thing about it.

Hamp said cheerfully, "I'm betting that when Gibney gets back you're a dead man. I wouldn't trade places with you for all that gold and silver in the tunnel. It wouldn't do me any good."

Eakin said, "I'm feeling bad."

"You're feeling scared."

"No, I mean it. Those eggs, we had for breakfast, didn't taste so good. Would you get me a cup of water?"

Hamp snorted. "I'm not waiting on you." He got up and walked to the window. He stared out and said, "They must be getting pretty close to the road. Damn you. I wanted to be in on this one."

How much time had gone by—fifteen or twenty minutes? Eakin didn't know. How could time, racing by so fast, seem so endless?

Hamp paced the room restlessly for several minutes. Eakin watched every step. Hamp's course kept him well away from Eakin. He had to get him close, and that was going to be difficult. The knife was still in Hamp's hand. He jabbed at the walls and woodwork as he walked. If Hamp's restlessness wasn't curbed, he was going to hack this house to pieces.

"I'm telling you my belly hurts," Eakin said.

"Shut up," Hamp growled.

Eakin twisted on the floor and moaned, "My belly's on fire."

Hamp watched him curiously. Eakin was now writhing as if in terrible pain. He doubled his knees up into his stomach,



then straightened them. In his convulsions he put a lot of pressure on his bonds. They didn't give.

His actions had Hamp's attention. Hamp moved a step toward him, then stopped. "You really sick?" he asked suspiciously. He moved another step.

Eakin didn't hear him. His legs straightened out again, and he rolled over on his stomach. He made a strangled sound, half yell and half groan. He finished rolling over and lay on his back. His knees were doubled up in his stomach again.

If his legs were straightened out, he could almost touch Hamp's legs with his boots. If he could get Hamp to come one step closer, just one step.

Hamp said, "Goddamn you, answer me."

Eakin's eyes were closed, and his lips were drawn back over locked teeth. His breathing had a whistling sound.

Hamp said, "Gibney would hate to see you go this way." He took that additional step.

Eakin's bound feet lashed out. His boot heels crashed into Hamp's knees. Hamp's cry of surprise shredded in his throat as his head snapped back. Eakin's bound feet had the force of a battering ram. The knees were sensitive joints. Eakin hoped he'd kicked hard enough to break them.

The kick drove Hamp backward. He threw up his arms, and the knife dropped from his hand. He fell awkwardly, and his head hit the table edge. His body made a dull, sodden sound as it hit the floor. He flopped over once, and there was a queer disjointedness about his actions.

Eakin flung himself forward on the floor, cursing his helplessness. Now he knew how a worm traveled. He threw his body on top of Hamp's. He battered at Hamp's face with his head, not feeling the pain the battering caused him.

He was gasping for breath, when he stopped, realizing that Hamp wasn't struggling beneath him. He raised his head. Hamp's face was bloody. Some of it might have been Eakin's blood.

He inched and rolled to the dropped knife. He put his bound hands against its edge, and the knife skittered away from the pressure. He had to find some way to wedge it

solid. He kept one eye on Hamp. If Hamp showed signs of returning consciousness, Eakin had to batter him with his head again.

He turned on his side and groped for the knife with his tied hands. The pressure of the rope had driven away all sense of touch. He was sweating, when he finally grasped the handle. He sobbed with relief as he lifted the knife from the floor. Now he had to find some way to wedge it into place. He tried to drive the point into the floor, and he couldn't get enough force. He raced against the fleeting minutes, and he was bathed in sweat. At any moment, Hamp might groan and open his eyes. Eakin kept watching him as he struggled. Hamp's head lay at a queer angle from his body.

If he could get the point of the knife into a crack in the floor, he might press it down far enough to make it stand upright. That took more precious minutes. It had to be done by sense of touch alone, and his hands were dead, awkward things.

How much time had gone by? He didn't know. It seemed he had used hours in this fearful effort. He felt the give in the knife as its point entered a crack. He gasped for air that had suddenly become too thin. He forced the knife as deep as he could, then released its handle, dreading to hear the small clink as it fell.

He squirmed around until he could see the knife. It stood upright. He would have to saw the rope very gently against the edge, or pressure would knock the knife out of the crack.

He looked at Hamp. That battering must have been worse than he realized, for Hamp still wasn't stirring.

He sat up and scooted himself a fraction of an inch at a time back toward the knife. His fingers were outstretched behind him to touch it. He wished he could keep the sweat from running into his eyes.

His fingers touched the knife edge, and he lowered his hands until the blade was against the ropes. He started a gentle sawing. He must have spent an eternity at it. His arms ached, and his face was wet. He chewed on his lower

lip until it was raw, but that easy sawing motion never stopped.

His hands parted suddenly, and he sagged forward, limp with exhaustion. He wanted to rest; he wanted to ease the ache in his arms and draw unharried breaths. He couldn't stop now. He spun around and picked up the knife. He cut the rope binding his feet. He staggered as he stood and threw out a hand against a wall to steady himself. His arms and legs were dead things, and he rubbed his wrists to restore circulation. The returning circulation put sharp, fiery needles all through him.

Shadows were beginning to fill the room as the sun's rays no longer came through the window. A lot of time had passed. Gibney and the others could be returning at any moment.

He walked to Hamp and looked down at him. Hamp's eyes were open, but they had a queer, fixed glassiness. Eakin understood why Hamp hadn't stirred. Either the fall or striking the table's edge had broken his neck.

He stooped and unbuckled Hamp's gun belt. He felt less lonely, when the gun was strapped about him. He stopped short as he thought he heard the distant sound of hoofs. He listened and didn't catch it again. Probably imagination, but it would be wise not to linger here. Now if he could only find Stepper.

He hurried to the horse shed, praying they hadn't taken his horse with them. He said, "Ho, boy," as he walked inside the shed. Stepper whinnied his pleasure at seeing him. Eakin was reaching for the saddle, when he heard the distant pound. This time, there was no mistaking it. It was the thud of hoofs against the earth.

He stepped to the door and saw the group of riders sweep over the crest of a nearby hill. They were too far away to recognize individually, but it had to be Gibney and his men.

There wasn't time to saddle Stepper. Eakin untied the reins and led him out of the shed, heading for the rear of it as quickly as possible. He moved at a slow walk, for motion drew attention more than anything else. He wished it

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was dark, and his nerves were tight in anticipation of a yell of discovery.

He kept the shed between himself and the oncoming riders. He would breathe easier, when he could melt into that copse of trees ahead. He had a long bareback trip ahead of him. He knew the general direction of Virginia City. It would be well after dark, when he reached it.

Gibney and his men were in roistering spirits. The two stages had been burdened with bullion. He had dumped six boxes, each so heavy that two men grunted as they lifted it down a mine shaft. He thought there would be no more hold-ups for a while. They would have their hands full in remelting that bullion and getting it to market.

His eyes glistened as he looked at McNie. McNie's bid for control had failed. With this success, not one of the men would listen to McNie, instead of him. McNie couldn't even count on Lige now. First, Gibney would get rid of Eakin, and that was going to be a chore he would enjoy.

He stepped up onto the porch and yelled, "Hamp. We're back."

He stopped in shock as he entered the room. He saw the severed pieces of rope and Hamp, lying dead. He didn't have to move nearer to know that Hamp was dead.

"Well?" he said harshly as McNie pushed in behind him.

"What do you think now?" he demanded of the other men. "Didn't I tell you he was planted here?"

"Not necessarily," McNie said desperately. "You left him tied up. Your threats scared him." His eyes moved from face to face. Every face had its accusing look. Garney McNie had brought Eakin here. He had to change their thinking, and he said, "How in the world did he kill Hamp?"

"I ought to kill you," Gibney said savagely. He turned and ran out of the door.

He was panting by the time he reached the horse shed. He stepped inside and made an unnecessary announcement. "His horse is gone."

Lige noticed Eakin's saddle still hanging on its peg. "He

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didn't take time to saddle up. He must have been in one hell of a hurry."

Gibney said, "I'm guessing he saw us coming and cleared out without saddling. He can't be too far away. Lige, I want you and McNie to ride with me to Virginia City. The rest of you scatter out and see if you can flush him out of the woods. Shoot him on sight. If you can't find him right away, come after us to town."

McNie said timidly, "Wouldn't it be better, if all of us looked for him around here?" He shrank back before the wildness in Gibney's eyes.

"You think he might be a little dangerous now, don't you, Garney? We've got to get to Virginia City before he gets to Gaede. I promise you, Garney, if he talks to Gaede, you're a dead man."

McNie licked his lips, and beads of sweat broke out on his forehead. "Let's ride," he said.

Gibney smiled at the panic in McNie's face.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

IT WAS nearing midnight by the time Eakin reached Virginia City. He had never seen his searchers, though he had heard them call to each other. He had slunk through the forest like a hungry, timber wolf, and he thought he had eluded them. Now he had to use the same caution in town, and he cursed that wanted poster he had requested Gaede to put out on him. If he were recognized, every hand in town, but Gaede's, would be against him.

The lateness of the hour had cut the traffic on the streets a little. He had another small factor in his favor. Anybody out at this late hour was either working, or had pleasure on their mind. They wouldn't be thinking of Dan Eakin.

He kept to the alleys and back streets until he was a block from Gaede's office. Be in, Ferris, he prayed. Once Gaede's door closed behind him, he could draw a free breath.

He tried the alley back of Gaede's office first and knocked as loud as he dared. It seemed to him that the echoes of his knocking carried to every corner of town. If Gaede was in, he didn't respond to Eakin's knocking. He thought of breaking down the door and even put a tentative shoulder against it. It was a stout door and breaking it down would make more noise than his knocking. He thought, I'll try the front door first. Gaede might have been in the front of his office and missed Eakin's knocking.

He came out of the alley and moved to the corner, sure that at any moment a cry of recognition would be raised. He peered around the corner toward Gaede's office. The street was fairly empty. He saw three men at the far corner of the

block. This block was probably as empty as he would ever find it. He drew a deep breath and walked rapidly toward the office.

Three men stood in the shadows of Thomas' Saddle Shop, across the street from Gaede's office. A light was on in the office, but they saw no silhouette crossing the lighted space of the window. They could see part of the desk, and Gaede wasn't behind it.

"I don't think he's in," McNie said hopefully. "We've been here for an hour. I don't think Eakin's coming. My guess is that he's cleared out of the country."

"Shut up," Gibney snarled. Worry was beginning to fill his head. Surely, Eakin should have been here by now. But maybe they hadn't given him enough time to reach Virginia City. After all, they had ridden hard on a direct route, while Eakin would have taken a sulking, circuitous one. God, how he wanted a cigarette. He didn't dare light one. Why didn't that damned Eakin appear? His thinking had to be right about him.

McNie grunted as he shifted his position. "It looks like you were wrong about him, Horace. It looks like . . ."

He broke off as the dark figure of a man turned the far corner and moved down the walk toward Gaede's office.

"Ah," Gibney said as he recognized Eakin. There was immense satisfaction in the word.

He eased his gun from its holster. The night and its shadows would make for bad shooting. He knew that Gaede rarely kept his front door locked. He would wait until Eakin opened it, until he was momentarily framed in the oblong shaft of light. He said in a low voice, "Hold it until I tell you." With all three of them firing at once, Eakin would be cut down before he took a step into the office. He heard the harsh rasp of McNie's breathing, and the nervous sound irritated him. He could smell the sour, stale odor of the man. McNie must be sweating like a hog.

Eakin was just stepping up onto the small stoop before the door, when McNie shifted position again. The small, scuffling

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movement sounded inordinately loud to Gibney, and he started to whisper, "Goddamnit. Keep still."

He didn't get the chance to say it. McNie blazed away at the shadowy figure across the street. The bullet thwacked into the building wall beside Eakin's head. Eakin never hesitated nor looked around to see where the shot came from. He broke into full stride and leaped across the stoop. He pounded down the street toward the corner.

Gibney fired at him, and he heard Lige's shot. He cursed with insane rage as he fired again. That bobbing, shadowy figure made a poor target. It would take a lucky shot to bring it down. The figure disappeared around the corner, and it was too late.

Gibney cursed McNie with terribly intensity.

McNie threw out a protesting hand. "I thought I could bring him down. I thought . . ." The words faltered and stopped.

Gibney said, "Garney, I've carried you around too long." He looked at Lige, and Lige nodded slowly.

McNie saw the decision against him in Lige's nod, and he squalled, "Now wait a minute. Listen . . ."

His voice broke abruptly as Gibney fired. The flash from the gun barrel almost touched McNie's clothing. The gun fell from McNie's hand as he clutched at his stomach.

He groaned and rose high on his toes. He hung there a long moment, then pitched forward on his face. Gibney shot him again as he fell.

Lige was breathing hard, and Gibney stared at him. "He made too many mistakes," Lige said huskily.

Gibney nodded in satisfaction. "We've got to find him, Lige. Before he talks to Gaede. If he talks to Gaede, we can kiss that bullion in the tunnel good-bye."

The thought of losing all that money was torture to Lige. He said savagely, "I'll be Goddamned, if we lose it. Do we split up?"

Gibney nodded. Lights were coming on all along the street. A block down he saw men running out of a saloon. He said, "We might as well get a little help." He raised his voice and



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bawled, "Dan Eakin's in town. He just shot Garney McNie." He gave Lige a tight, strained grin.

"I'll circle the block," Lige said and ran in the opposite direction Eakin had taken.

Gibney ran after Eakin. Eakin had to keep to the back streets and alleys. He couldn't call on anyone for help. Gibney could slow his pace after he left the main street. It would be slow, torturous work probing every niche, every shadow. His nerves would be wracked fine. But that was the way it was going to have to be.

Eakin moved cautiously down the alley. He hadn't seen who had shot at him, but he was sure it was Gibney, or some of his bunch. His breathing was slowing. That had been a mad run to the corner. A man's back hurt like an aching tooth, when he expected a bullet to smack into it.

They had apparently guessed he would go to Gaede's office. Now they would hunt him down. Every patch of shadow, every corner held its potential menace. He was going to be strung tight before he was out of this. It wasn't only Gibney and his men against him—those shots had pulled attention—he had every hand in the town against him. Now he knew what a cornered animal felt like.

He stood for a long time a few feet from the mouth of the alley, peering into the street that intersected it. He saw no movement, and no instinct picked at him. He drew a deep breath and darted across the street, plunging into the alley on the other side. His breathing sounded like a long sigh, as the alley's narrow confines closed about him.

He moved down a segment of the alley, his cautious steps making slow work of it. He had to do better than this. While he was making such painful progress, they could move with speed, blocking every exit. The best thing he could do was to get out of town as quickly as possible, then figure out some way to get word to Gaede.

He was within fifty feet of where the alley came out onto the street again, when he froze. Some instinct had warned him of danger ahead. He cursed the moonless night. Had

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movement up ahead caught his eye, or was imagination playing fearful tricks upon him? His eyes probed every foot between him and the street. The shadow near the base of the wall of the building against the street looked thicker than it should be. Was his instinct false, was it more imagination? He made his breathing slow and shallow, hoping to hear some small sound that would help him locate the source of his alarm. He heard nothing.

He stooped and felt soundlessly about him with his left hand. His fingers closed on a tin can. He straightened and tossed the can a good twenty feet ahead of him.

It lit with a clatter that sounded deafeningly loud after the silence.

The can had barely started its roll, when part of the shadow detached itself from the wall. A tongue of fire lanced through the darkness, and Eakin heard the crashing reports of a shot, a second, then a third.

He fired at those tongues of flame. He heard a deep, coughing grunt, the sound a man makes when he is hard hit. He fired again and saw the shadowy figure break at the middle and fall. He approached it cautiously, his gun ready. He saw no movement. The black mass of a gun lay a few inches from an outstretched hand and he kicked it farther away.

He rolled the man over and stared down into Lige's face. Lige was still breathing, but it had a harsh, laborious sound. His voice was only a whisper, and Eakin had to stoop to catch it.

"Why, Goddamn you," Lige said, and there was a wondering note in his voice. "You fooled everybody but Gibney. You got McNie killed for it. But you'll never get away. Gibney's got all his men looking for you. Everybody in town . . ." The sentence broke off in the middle, and Lige's head fell back with a little thud.

Eakin straightened. He heard cries coming from every direction. Gibney was looking for him, the town was looking for him. And Gaede was the only man, who could keep him from being shot on sight. He had only one big problem.

## G U N R I C H

Where was Gaede? He couldn't stay on the streets any longer. He had to find a place to hide, then hope he could get word to Gaede later. Unity! Her name popped into his mind. She could hide him, then find Gaede. But would she listen to him? His face was grim. She had to listen. He would make her listen.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

UNITY'S HOUSE was at the end of a side street, and Eakin knew relief as he saw the light in the window. The hour was late, and he had been afraid he would lose more valuable time in arousing her. He could hear the yells coming from the main streets. Gibney would have plenty of help by now. He would tell everyone he saw that Eakin was in town; he would have all of Virginia City joining in the search.

He knocked on her door and heard the light sound of footsteps approaching it.

Unity opened the door a crack and asked, "Who is it?"

Instead of answering, he pushed sharply against the door, forcing her back into the room. He stepped quickly inside and closed the door behind him.

He saw no fear in her face, only anger and indignation.

"You," she said contemptuously.

She wore a light gray robe, buttoned to the throat, and he thought a woman could never look more lovely.

"Unity," he said, and there was an unconscious pleading in his voice. "You've got to listen to me."

"Get out," she ordered, and there was no weakness in her voice.

He strode toward her, and she retreated to a wall. Some expression crossed her face. It could have been the awakening of fear, or more indignation.

He seized her upper arms and said harshly, "You're going to listen to me."

She struggled for an instant, and her eyes were furious. "You're hurting my arms."

## GUN RICH

"Will you listen to me?"

She nodded, and its stiffness said, only because you're forcing me to.

He released her arms and stepped back. "Ferris Gaede and I have known each other for years. We even put our ranches together. He took the job as marshal here to find out who murdered his son. I wanted him back home. I came up to help him."

The ring of truth was in his voice, and her eyes searched his face. "You held up the stage," she accused. "I saw the wanted poster."

He grinned at her. "Technically, I'm a road agent. It was the only way I could think of to find out who was behind all the robberies. I didn't think they'd let me cut in on them."

She asked breathlessly, "You found out?"

He nodded. "McNie and Gibney." He saw the shock in her face and knew anger. She still felt something for Gibney.

He thought she needed more convincing and said, "Who was in a better position to know when the bullion was being shipped? Gibney organized the whole thing."

"They could have killed you."

He understood the expression on her face. It was concern for him. "They're trying to now. Everybody in town is looking for me. Unity, I need someplace to hide until I can get word to Ferris. He can put an end to the hunting."

"You'll stay here. I'll find Ferris, and . . ." She broke off suddenly, and the anger was back in her eyes. "You amused yourself while you were hunting them, didn't you?"

For a moment, he was puzzled, then he laughed. "You mean Cora?"

His laughter incensed her, and he said hastily, "Easy. Cora was Garney McNie's woman. I saw him break up with her. I thought she might want to hurt him. She didn't know anything." His voice grew plaintive. "She got drunk on me, and I had to see her home. I owed her that much, didn't I, for trying to use her?"

Her face turned a fiery red, and her eyes couldn't meet his.

## GUN RICH

He chuckled and asked, "Were you a little jealous, Unity? I was going to straighten it out with you, when this was all over."

"I wasn't jealous," she snapped. "And you could have waited too long. Gibney asked me to marry him again the following morning. I could have accepted him."

He said quietly, "You had too much sense for that." He seized her before she realized his hands were even moving. He drew her to him, and she fought him. She said furiously, "You take a lot of liberty. I haven't said . . ."

His eyes bored into hers. "Do you have to, Unity?"

She stared at him, and all the fight went out of her. "Oh no," she said. She came to him, and her lips lifted to meet his. He felt the sweet pressure of them with their promise of the future. He knew kissing her would be like this, and its magic would grow.

He lifted his head and said, "Unity . . ." The pounding at the door interrupted him. It had a harsh, demanding note. No friend of hers would knock like that. His mind jumped from conclusion to conclusion. The obvious one was that he had been followed here.

Her face went white, and she placed her forefinger against her lips. She led him into the kitchen and pointed to the trapdoor, leading to the root cellar. It was a well-fashioned door, the cracks it left in the floor barely discernible. She pointed to the small rug, just outside the kitchen door, and he understood her meaning. She would cover the trapdoor with the small rug, further disguising its presence.

He opened the door and stared at the steps below it. He hated to go down those steps. If he were discovered, he would be trapped in that hole.

The knocking came again, louder and harsher, and she gave him a small push. That knocking had a positive, sure sound, and Eakin didn't think the maker of it was alone. Probably the house was surrounded. The hole, beneath his boots, was his only choice.

He gave her a bleak grin as he descended. She closed the trapdoor with such infinite care he didn't hear a sound. It

was as black as a month of moonless nights down there. He drew his gun and stared upward. He wished he could hear a sound; he wished he knew what was going on.

Unity lowered the trapdoor, spread the small rug over it, and lifted the wooden table onto the rug.

"I know you're in there," an angry voice yelled. "I'll break this damned door down."

She cried, "I'm coming." She flashed a glance at the table and the rug as she left the kitchen. It appeared normal.

She opened the door, and Gibney pushed at her, forcing her back. He swung the door wide and stepped inside. Two men followed him.

Gibney's eyes were narrow with suspicion. "It took you long enough to answer the door."

"I was in bed," she said indignantly. "I had to put something on."

Her indignation seemed real to him, but she could be acting. If she were acting, he had to shock her out of it, and his mind picked at the problem.

He said, "Dan Eakin's been hurt real bad. I don't think he's going to make it."

It was a lie, and she knew it. What was his reason in telling it? She had a quick and agile mind, and it reached an obvious answer. If she knew it was a lie, then he could expect to see scorn on her face at his clumsy attempt to trick her.

"No," she cried. Her eyes went wide, and she pressed her hand to her mouth. She shuddered, and her voice was broken. "Take me to him. Please, Horace." She didn't know where he would lead her. It didn't matter. It would keep him from searching the house.

He was enraged at her concern for Eakin, but he managed to keep it hidden. She wasn't acting; she believed him. Eakin wasn't here.

He knew the sickness of defeat. He had found two of his men just entering town. If they could have jumped upon Eakin right away, he might have saved the game. But now every passing minute was a terrible menace to him. Eakin

might already have reached Gaede. He could salvage what he could carry and no more. But he could do one thing that might take some of the sting away. He could take her with him.

He said gruffly, "I'll take you to him." By using this pretense, he could get her out of town with no outcry from her.

She didn't want to go with him, and she was shaking inwardly. She said, "Wait until I get dressed. I won't be a minute."

She had never dressed as fast in her life. She was driven by the fear that Gibney might be searching the house, while she dressed. She had no way to leave Eakin a message. She had no pencil, no paper in her bedroom. She thought for a moment, then picked up her robe from the bed. She tore it from shoulder to hem. Then she overturned a chair noiselessly and laid it on the floor. She wanted to sweep her toilet articles from the dressing table, but she didn't dare. That would make a clatter.

She opened the bedroom door and closed it quickly behind her. Gibney was standing almost in the same spot as she had left him. Her relief made her almost sick.

He said, "Let's go, and held the door open for her. He helped her mount and climbed up behind her. He looked at the men with him and said, "It's all over. It's every man for himself, now."

He had left the door open, and Unity looked with sick longing at the oblong shaft of light. She hoped the torn robe and the overturned chair would mean something to Eakin. He knew how Gibney felt about her. He had to figure out what had happened.

She was asking for miracles, and she knew it. The sickness of fear rose in her throat until she almost gagged with it. Gibney put the horse into motion. He didn't look around as he heard the thud of hoofs behind him. The hoofs had a receding sound. The men weren't following him.

Eakin had no idea of how much time had passed. It seemed like years. He heard no sound. What had happened, after



she answered the knock? He had expected to hear the pound of boots above his head, but it hadn't happened. He would almost have welcomed the sound. The silence had a pressure that he could feel physically. He wanted to pace to relieve the pressure, and the root cellar was barely large enough for him to turn around. He swore as his shoulder brushed an earthen wall. He would wait a few more minutes—no more.

He let those few minutes double, then triple. He had the queer feeling the house was empty, and he wished he knew. He was tempted to call out to her, and he thought, not while I'm down here. With gun in his right hand, he crept up the steps. He put his shoulder against the trapdoor and tried to ease it open. It didn't budge. He felt a moment of panic. What if Unity weren't here? What if she had locked the door on him. He pushed aside the panic. Even if the trapdoor had a lock, she wouldn't lock it on him, and she wouldn't leave. He bent his head and got more of his shoulder under the door. The angle of the steps was awkward for him to get the leverage he needed. He grunted as he heaved at the door. He could feel give in it. But something was on it. He thought, maybe some piece of furniture she pulled over it. He put forth more effort, and the door rose. He heard a crash as whatever was on the door overturned.

He shoved the door away from him and took an upward step. The crash was resoundingly loud. If anybody was in or near the house, it would pull attention. The best thing he could do was to get out of this hole as quickly as possible.

His head was just above the floor level, when he saw the pair of boots, standing at the side of the hole. He couldn't breathe around the lump that jumped into his throat and blocked it. He could never get the gun above the floor and aim—not before whoever was standing there drilled him. His eyes traveled up the boots to the baggy-kneed trousers, then to the waist.

He looked at the craggy face and said, "Damn you, Ferris." The oath carried all the relief he felt.

Gaede said, "Climb out of there. I came out of the restaurant and find the town full of dead men. Garney McNie's

lying in the street, and there's another one in an alley. People are running all over the place, claiming you did it."

Eakin climbed the steps and said, "Gibney killed McNie. I had to kill the other one." His wrath mounted. If Gaede had been in his office, none of this would have happened. "Where in the hell were you?"

Gaede's face was aggrieved. "I sat in my office and worried about you. I missed my regular suppertime. Then when I get so damned hungry I can't stand it, I stepped out for twenty minutes."

"You picked a hell of a time for it." Eakin said. He looked around the kitchen. The overturned table was the only disorderly element. He walked to the door. The parlor was empty.

"Where's Unity?" he demanded sharply.

"I don't know. I was trying to find you. I thought you might've come here. The door was wide open. I walked in and saw that trapdoor beginning to move."

Eakin's heart felt as if a hard hand was squeezing it. Rapidly, he told Gaede what had happened. "Gibney and McNie," he said. "I knew they had to stop me before I talked to you. They were waiting for me across from your office. I was lucky they missed. Gibney shot McNie because he took me in. That damned poster had everybody in town after me. I came here to get Unity to hide me, until she could find you. Somebody knocked on the door, and she put me down that hole. That was an hour ago."

Gaede shook his head. "It couldn't have been that long. I heard the first shots a half hour ago."

Eakin didn't argue. It had seemed that long to him. "She wouldn't go away and leave the door open. Ferris, something's wrong."

He walked to the bedroom door and opened it. His eyes went bleak as he saw the overturned chair and the torn robe.

"Somebody carried her off," he said grimly. "She put up a fight."

"Gibney?"

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Eakin nodded. "It has to be him. He's on the run, and he's taken her with him."

Gaede's face looked like eroded granite. "We'd better go after him."

Eakin asked helplessly, "Where would he go?"

"We'll try his place out in the valley. If he's running, he'll try to take what he can with him."

They started for the front door, and Eakin said, "Gibney shot Pete. One of his men told me."

Gaede nodded. His face showed no expression. Eakin looked at that tough countenance. Gibney couldn't run far enough to lose Ferris Gaede.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

UNITY ASKED, "How much farther?" Gibney's arms were about her, and she had to fight to keep her trembling from showing. There were moments, when she wanted to scream with the fear. How would Dan Eakin, or anybody else know where she was?

Gibney said, "Just a little way." He had kept his horse to a sedate pace, not wanting to alarm her quicker than necessary. When she learned what he intended, it was going to be hard to handle her. He had no compunction at using force on her. In fact, he expected to have to use it. He would beat submission into her, if he had to. She could cut the punishment short by being smart and accepting the inevitable. It depended upon her decision.

The doubly-burdened horse topped a small rise, and the house was darkly silhouetted against the hills surrounding it.

"Who lives here?" she asked. She was sure she knew. Dan, she prayed. Guess where I've gone. Follow me.

"That's my place," he answered. "I sell and trade a few horses here."

She had heard that he did. She had always been able to control him before. But here and Virginia City were two different places. Perhaps her confidence in Virginia City was because she was surrounded by people. What would her confidence have to bolster itself with out here?

She thought she felt increased pressure of his arms, and she asked quickly, "Is he here?"

"Yes," Gibney said gravely. "He came out here to trade

horses. The one he picked threw him." He was prepared to lie about why Eakin came to him, but she didn't ask.

He tied the horse to the rail before the house. From a nearby corral, a horse whinnied, and Gibney's horse answered. He would have to saddle her a horse. They couldn't travel fast nor far, riding double.

He helped her down, and she tried to draw back from his touch. "The house is dark," she said.

"Maybe he felt like sleeping and blew out the lamp." It didn't make any difference what he told her any more. He didn't care whether or not she believed him. He had gotten her this far, and that was all that was necessary.

He drew her up the steps and kept a grip on her wrist, while he fumbled for a key. In the darkness, he had trouble fitting it into the lock. She jerked against his grip while his attention was diverted from her.

She turned and fled down the steps. If she could *only* find a hiding place and make him use up precious time, while he searched for her.

He cursed her as he ran after her. His superior speed overtook her before she reached the shadows of the shed, behind the house. He caught her shoulder, spun her around, and slapped her sharply across the cheek.

Her head flew back, and a hand rose to the hurt. She broke off her cry of hurt before it was fully sounded.

He seized her wrist and drew her to him. "You can have it as rough as you want it."

"Horace," she pleaded. "What's happening? You didn't use to be this way."

He thought of her rejections of him, and his rage was full-blown. "What's happening?" he repeated. "You're coming with me, whether you want to or not."

"I won't," she cried and tried to jerk away.

He cuffed her again. "You'll learn," he said grimly and dragged her back to the house. He opened the door, then locked it behind them. He shoved her into a chair and said harshly, "Stay there."

She heard him fumbling around on a table, then the

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sudden brilliance of the lamp hurt her eyes after the darkness. She stared in terrified fascination at the glitter in his eyes and thought, he's mad.

She said calmly, "Dan Eakin will kill you for this trick."

He grinned mirthlessly. "He won't even know where to begin to look."

"He'll know. By now, he's talked to Ferris Gaede. They're both looking for you." She prayed her words were true. How desperately she prayed they were true.

He asked sharply, "How did you know he was looking for Gaede." Realization struck him, and he said hoarsely, "You've talked to him tonight."

She nodded. "Yes. He was in the house, when you got there. He knows you took me with you."

Now he understood why she went so willingly. She wanted to get him away from her house. The sickness of frustration filled him. He had the game in his hand. All he had to do was to kill Eakin, and she had thwarted him.

He slapped her twice, savage blows that rocked her head back and forth. Her eyes were dazed, and she tried hard to make no sound, but little, soft moans escaped her. He had the terrible impulse to kill her, and it took effort to hold it in check.

He said, "You'll regret this, Unity. I was going to marry you. You'll beg me to marry you before I'm through with you."

He pulled a bandana from his pocket, forced her to lean forward in the chair, and bound her hands behind her.

He stepped back and said, "I told you, you could make it rough. You picked what you wanted."

His mind darted ahead, thinking of what he must do. He had to pack a few clothes and take what money he had hidden here. It was a considerable sum, though rage flooded him when he thought of what he was leaving. He could have been a wealthy man, and she and Eakin had blocked it. He could punish both of them through her. He would take the bay for himself and the sorrel with the blaze for her. Both of them had endurance, and they would need it for the trip through the mountains. The west coast, he thought. San

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Francisco, or Los Angeles. Eakin would never find them in either place.

He glared at her. "How you're going to regret this."

She couldn't keep her terror from showing on her face. He was insane. She had to make time for herself, for every minute would count now. She said pleadingly, "Horace, you used to care for me. Maybe . . ."

She shrank back before the awful burning in his eyes.

He said, "Shut up. If you make one move to get out of that chair, I'll cuff you senseless."

He walked into the bedroom, leaving the door open.

She could see him moving about, stuffing articles into a valise on the bed. Every few seconds, he stopped to glance at her. Despair kept welling up into her throat, fighting for escape in little sobs. These trackless mountains would swallow them. Dan would never find them.

Gaede said, "I knew we should have taken time to get you a saddle."

Eakin snarled at him. "I'm keeping up with you. Don't slack off because of me." A terrible fear roweled him. He wished he knew how much time he had actually spent in that root cellar. Gibney's lead was in direct proportion to the time Eakin had spent in that hole.

Suppose Gibney hadn't gone out to his place at all? It was logical that he would, but the logic was from Eakin's viewpoint.

He rode behind Gaede, and he pressed him hard, and Gaede was grumbling because he thought Eakin couldn't keep up.

Gaede stopped just below the crest of a hill, and Eakin swore at him.

"His place is just over the other side," Gaede said. "He can kill her, if we go galloping in."

Eakin swore at him again. "And he can be getting farther away with every minute."

"Yes," Gaede agreed grimly.

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They moved to the hill top, and a spot of light shone from the little valley below.

"Somebody's there," Gaede said.

"Or was," Eakin answered.

Gaede nodded. Gibney could have gone off, leaving the light burning.

They rode slowly toward the light, and Eakin said, "A horse is out in front. Do you know it?"

At this distance, it was hard to identify a horse. Gaede peered at it. "It could be the one he rode this morning." He was silent for a moment, then he grunted, "It is." The flat words showed none of the relief within him.

"We'd better go on foot from here," he said.

Eakin wanted to dash up to the house and run inside. He had to know, if Unity were here. He nodded slowly. Gaede was right.

They dismounted and crept to within fifty feet of the porch. The horse, tied at the rail, stirred restlessly at their presence.

Eakin wanted to push on, and Gaede checked him. "We'll wait until he comes out," he whispered.

Eakin wanted to yell, we don't even know he's in there. He saw a dark silhouette cross a drawn shade and was silent. Somebody was in there.

The waiting was endless. Eakin couldn't stand much more of it. Whoever was in the house might not even be Gibney.

He started to move, and Gaede grunted, "The door's opening."

Eakin stared at it. He saw Gibney come out first and glance all around. Then Gibney reached back and pulled somebody after him. "It's Unity," he whispered.

"Let him get to the edge of the porch," Gaede returned in a fast rasp of sound.

"He's yours," Eakin said.

Gaede nodded, and the nod was thanks.

Gibney started down the steps, pulling Unity after him.

Gaede straightened and yelled, "Gibney. Hold it right there."



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Gibney went rigid, and his snarl seemed frozen in time. "Take him," Eakin said.

Gaede shook his head, and Eakin knew he was thinking of the girl.

Gibney must have thought of Unity at the same time, for he grabbed for her, intending to use her as a shield. She flung herself away from him, and his fingers closed on the sleeve of her dress. The material tore at the shoulder as she threw herself to the floor of the porch.

Gibney stood with the torn sleeve in his hand.

Gaede roared, "Gibney."

Gibney dropped the sleeve of the dress and made a grab for his gun. Even with the terrible jolt of surprise he had had, he was fast. His gun was rising out of the holster, when Gaede shot him. Gibney threw out his arms and staggered back in broken steps. Gaede advanced slowly toward him, firing at each step until he emptied the gun. Eakin could see Gibney's body jerk as the bullets hit him. Gibney had remarkable vitality. He was still on his feet after the third hit. The fourth sagged him to his knees, and he still fought to stay erect. The last shot in Gaede's gun hammered him over backwards, and he slid a little distance along the porch.

Gaede's gun lowered, and his shoulders were heavy with their drooping. The months of seeking were done, and with the purpose gone, he was empty. He looked old and beaten as he plodded toward the porch. Eakin passed him before Gaede reached the steps. He bounded up them and gathered Unity into his arms. He swore as he untied her wrists. "Are you all right?" he kept asking.

"All right, Dan," she said between sobbing and laughing. "All I could think of to do was to throw myself away from him."

"You thought right," he said and patted her shoulder.

She turned her head to look at Gibney. "Is he dead?" she whispered.

Eakin saw Gaede toe the body over, saw the limp sprawl of it. "He's dead," he said in a flat voice.

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She shuddered and clung to him. "He was crazy," she said in a faint voice. "I kept praying you'd come."

"I found the torn robe and the overturned chair." Eakin's voice was angry. "I knew he'd be the only one to use force on you like that."

She smiled weakly. "He didn't use force until we got here. I went with him to keep him from searching the house."

He stared at her incredulously. "You tore that robe and overturned the chair?" She had put herself in real danger for him. He said harshly, "I'll never forgive you for that."

She laughed, and the notes in it rang true. "I think you will, Dan."

He tried to look sternly at her, but his lip corners kept twitching. "Unity, marry me tomorrow so we can go home."

She looked at him a long moment, and he was afraid refusal was forming on her tongue. "I'd like that," she said simply. "Oh yes, Dan."

He picked her up and started toward the horses. Laughter bubbled in her voice. "Put me down. I can walk."

He said soberly, "I don't think I'll ever put you down again."

He looked at Gaede and asked, "You coming, Ferris?" "Go ahead," Gaede answered. "I'll catch up with you."

He was still staring at Gibney's body, and Eakin knew he was putting a proper burial to a lot of memories. "Sure, Ferris," he said gently.

The wedding was a simple one. Eakin knew no one in Virginia City, and Unity wanted nobody in particular. She had said, "They were only acquaintances anyway, Dan."

The minister said, "You can kiss your bride now."

Eakin bent his head. He didn't know how long the kiss lasted, but Gaede tapped him on the shoulder.

"Here now," Gaede said. "Let me show her how a man would do it."

"Go ahead," Eakin said and grinned. "It's the only chance you'll ever get."

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He watched Unity lift her face for Gaede's kiss. He was a lucky man.

He said, "That's enough, Ferris. We've got a stage to catch. Sure you won't change your mind and come with us?"

Gaede shook his head. "I'll stay until this is all cleared up. I've got that last shipment to find. Then I'll have to see that a new man is started right."

Eakin nodded. That was Ferris' way. He'd never leave a job while a single loose string dangled.

Gaede said, "I'll take good care of Stepper. One of these days, you'll look out the door and see us riding up."

"We'll keep the door open just for that," Unity promised.

Eakin's head was filled with words, and he couldn't say them. He stood there, until Gaede growled, "They're not putting much stuff in the younger generation. If I had me a pretty bride, I wouldn't be standing around, trying to talk. Unity, do you think you can ever make anything out of him?"

She looked at Eakin with radiant eyes. "I'm going to try."

"Don't let him start out by missing the stage," Gaede said.

Eakin grabbed her arm and started down the walk. Their luggage was already at the depot. He looked back after a half block, and Gaede still stood there. He lifted his hand in a wave, and Gaede acknowledged it. Gaede would be following them soon. Eakin had a right to swell with a good feeling. He had made it possible for Ferris Gaede to come home.

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